

The Writers' Room™: The Story of a Writing Center

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Five years ago we were a pair of parent volunteers, working one period a week in one English class at our local high school. We were there because, as writers of educational materials, we needed to keep ourselves honest – and because an innovative, imaginative department chair, Bernadette Anand, had responded to our request with an invitation that would help meet both our needs and hers. And now we were all hooked – the two of us on what we saw happening in students' writing; Bernadette, on the possibilities our presence opened up for her. With us available to conference with students, to read and respond to papers, to help guide students through line editing, she was able to commit herself wholeheartedly to a writing process approach.

But she was only one teacher, we were only two volunteers, and the impact of what we were doing was felt by only two dozen or so students. Thrilled with the change in both process and product that our collaboration had so far yielded, we all wanted more. But how? How could we make what we were doing available to every one of the 1,400 students at Montclair High School?

STARTING A WRITING CENTER

There was a simple answer: a writing center. NCTE had recently published Pam Farrell's book *The High School Writing Center* (1989, Urbana, IL: NCTE), and we consulted Pam herself, as well as other directors of high school writing centers. What we learned was that high school writing centers were few and far between, and most of them relied on teachers who took turns sitting in a room to which students came for help. We wanted something different. We wanted to multiply the effect we had seen in Bernadette's classroom – to give every teacher extra hands and eyes and voices; to involve all students in the writing process.

So we wrote a proposal for a writing center to be staffed almost entirely by community volunteers whom we would train. We would like to report that, as in the movies, the idea was greeted with enthusiasm, funding poured in, and we were in business within months. In fact, our proposal kicked around for a year, unable to attract the funding we needed for developing the training materials and for directors' stipends. As we talked up our idea, we also found that people interpreted "writing center" in varying ways: a lab with computers...remediation for poor spellers and grammarians...a creative writing class. Unsure of how many of the practical details could be worked out, we made a blanket decision not to anticipate problems but just to assume that solutions would present themselves when we needed them.

Funding, for example, was resolved when someone (we'll never know exactly who) realized that the small sum of money left in a block grant Montclair High School had received from the state of New Jersey was probably just right for our project. It wasn't – but we revised our plans to fit the amount we were given. We were worried about attracting volunteers, but at our first gathering of prospective coaches nearly three dozen people crowded into Sheila's dining room and kitchen, responding to announcements in church and synagogue buildings, personal entreaties, and an article in our local paper.

We opened in April of 1993, a month before our Board of Education approved a new English class for all 9th graders – a de-tracked, heterogeneously grouped course in World Literature. In our urban-suburban school (with a student population that is over 50% African-American), that was a hard-won battle. And the Writers’ Room – as our project was now known – became the one neutral zone in the months’ long war. It was something everyone agreed was good – in fact, necessary.

BEGINNING OPERATION

It would have been hard to tell that, however, from our first few months of operation. No one at the high school – least of all, ourselves – seemed to understand how we intended to operate. It came as a surprise to the administration that we needed a room; and when it turned out that a room was available only during the three lunch periods, those, along with the before- and after-school periods, became our hours of operation. We envisioned the Writers’ Room primarily as a drop-in center, where at least two coaches would be stationed at all times to handle the students flocking in during their study halls, or perhaps sent in small groups from their English or social studies classes. So it came as a surprise to us that we sat, period after period, in an empty room. What we hadn’t known was that Montclair High School no longer scheduled study halls as a matter of course. Very few students had free periods; and in the balmy spring weather, none of them wanted to give up part of a lunch period.

Searching for Students

It was clear that we would have to go in search of business – and we did. We began a practice that we still engage in today of walking the halls and chatting with teachers on hall duty, hanging out in the teachers’ lounge, and generally making ourselves part of the school. Little by little we attracted customers, and teachers who liked the results and wanted us to see more of their students began to propose ways of broadening our reach. And that’s how we found the easiest and most popular way to bring kids and coaches together: at the teacher’s invitation, we took groups of coaches into the classroom to conference with students during class time – at the prewriting stage, while students were drafting, or when they had completed a first draft.

Establishing a Pattern

By the end of that school year, we had established a pattern that worked for us. We were open all day, three days a week, and before and after school by appointment only. Students were free to drop in if they could, but most of our contact with students occurred when we came into their classrooms or when we read and responded to their papers. To make this part of the job easier, we had carbonless carbon forms made by our local print shop so that we could write our responses on a separate piece of paper (rather than on the students’ essays) and keep a copy in our files. We had also won our battle to use part of our grant money to buy a photocopying machine so that we could keep copies of students’ drafts along with our responses. Our filing cabinet was gradually filling up with “sandwiches” composed of [rewriting notes made in a conference with a coach, topped by a first draft, then our response sheet, and finally a second draft.

Changing Student Writing

Browsing through these packets of papers – as we have done at the end of each school year for the 9th-grade portfolio assessment – we could see how the presence of The Writers’ Room had begun to change the way students wrote. Because their teachers could make more time available for prewriting, students were exploring their ideas via webs, lists, diagrams, and random jottings. First drafts were more open and fluid. There were blanks where words needed to be filled in later, several word choices stacked on top of or alongside one another, alternate wordings of whole sentences in brackets. Sometimes we even found marginal notations: Should I move this paragraph? Do I need to say more here? I don’t like the ending. These were students writing for feedback, asking as they wrote, Is my point clear? Can you understand me? In their second drafts, we sometimes saw changes that went beyond our suggestions for revision or – even more exciting – changes that bypassed our suggestions and instead took the paper in a bold new direction of the student’s choosing.

THE SECOND YEAR

When school opened in September, we were really in business. We had one established group of coaches and were training another. We had graduated to a room of our own. And we had 350 9th graders in a course that was built around the writing process. Never mind that our room was the size of a closet or that we lost it partway through the year when melting ice and snow on the roof brought our ceiling and gallons of water crashing down. (It was the winter that the Northeast suffered through 17 snowstorms.) We were an institution.

Our log filled up with appointments: four coaches in each of four World Literature classes one day; five coaches in each of two World History classes another day, along with six drop-ins from various English classes; two dozen Earth Science papers to read and respond to; 50 papers on *Of Mice and Men*; a dozen students with college essays one week in the fall, just before the early admissions deadline; a student who had come in with a history paper and returned with a novel she was writing. By the end of the year, we had more than 40 coaches; over 500 students had seen us on a drop-in basis; we had more than 4,000 conferences with students in their classrooms; and we had provided additional responses to nearly 1,400 papers.

We had also done some things often enough so that we could describe them with certainty as regular practices. We had, for example, a group of about 10 coaches who had full-time jobs and were unable to come into the school during the day. We had originally intended to use them in the before-school time slot; now, however, they had become outside readers, on call to read papers at home and provide written responses when a teacher handed us three or four class sets of essays.

We had developed a routine for working with coaches in the classroom. We discussed the assignment with the teacher ahead of time, then briefed the coaches on what the students had done so far and what expectations the teacher had for this class. After the class we conducted a debriefing, with coaches sharing their experiences and talking through any questions or problems that had arisen. We had also discovered that this way of working made it essential for an administrator or coordinator (paid a small stipend) to be on site at all times. Someone was needed, not only to give an occasional mini-lesson or fill in when we needed an extra coach (as we had originally projected), but to schedule and coordinate the coaches and outside readers, be

the liaison between teachers and coaches, and actively drum up business – networking with the teachers, suggesting ways we could help out in the classroom, even contributing to the creation of writing assignments.

Our six-week training program had been modified as we made discoveries about the curriculum, the students, and the reality of operating in a classroom where a bell rang at the end of 43 minutes. We tried to give volunteers a basic understanding of the writing process, an array of prewriting strategies, and – most of all – a way of reading and responding to first drafts that would encourage students to revise. We wanted our coaches' responses to take students back into their source material (whether it was personal experience, a work of literature, an event in history, or a scientific hypothesis) to find new ideas and information, new connections, and new ways of expressing what they thought. It was quickly apparent that, good though it was, our 6-week course wasn't enough. Coaches needed to the feedback they got from working in the classroom or meeting with students one on one. So we formalized the four weeks following the training sessions calling it an internship and making sure that new coaches were paired with experienced ones and monitored closely.

Finally, we established a firm connection with the teacher certification and MAT programs at Montclair State University. It had been part of our five-year plan to find the right person to connect with at Montclair State; but while we were still in Year 1, she came to us. Sara Jonsberg, newly arrived to take over the job of teaching the secondary English methods course, heard about The Writers' Room on Sunday at the Unitarian Church. She called us immediately, and by Thanksgiving, we had not only Sara but a dozen of her students as new coaches. Nearly three years later, Sara is still coming to Montclair High School every week to work with student writers, and she has been an invaluable sounding board, advisor, and encourager for us. Each semester around a dozen students – some of them almost ready for student teaching, others just beginning the certification program – add The Writers' Room training onto their schedule of classes and spend part of the semester working with us. They get hands-on experience in teaching writing, and we get the energy and excitement generated by about-to-be-teachers. As a bonus, for the last three semesters, The Writers' Room has shared a student teacher/coach with a member of the English department.

THE FOURTH YEAR

We have completed our fourth year of operation. When New Jersey state funding ran out, The Writers' Room was made a line item in the district's budget, and we were asked to expand our program in to Montclair's two middle schools. We spent much of the school year becoming acquainted with the middle school curriculum, teachers, and operations; training new coaches (and retraining seasoned ones) to work with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders; and looking for replacements for ourselves. Each middle school would need someone in the role we had occupied in the high school; in addition, we needed an on-site person at the high school so that we could be free to consult, trouble shoot, and focus on program development at all three schools.

We posted al three jobs with some trepidation: would anyone be able to do this complex task as well as we had? Could we turn our creation over to someone else and trust that it would thrive and grow? The answer was an unqualified yes when, from among our experienced coaches,

candidates emerged for all three jobs. Now, as we go from school to school, we experience the thrill reserved for teachers and parents: we see our idea nurtured by the people we taught. Even better, we see their own ideas enhancing and enlarging ours.

numbers are impressive. In addition to the two of us, we have four on-site coordinators, almost 70 community volunteers in the schools, 12 outside readers, and about 12 Montclair State students each semester.

WHAT IS LEFT TO DO

If we've made our dream come true and found a way to perpetuate it without our day-to-day involvement, what else is left to do? Enough so that we're not making immediate plans for retirement. We need, for example, to provide more coaches for the two middle schools. The Writers' Room is so popular at this level that, at the moment, we're busier here than at the high school. We also need to think about there's more of a market for The Writers' Room in grades 6-8. Why are these teachers more open to a process approach to writing? Why are they more interested in creative writing workshop classrooms? Does the way the middle school day is structured make it easier to accommodate the writing process? Do these differences suggest ways in which the high school might evolve?

At the high school level, we need to look beyond Grade 9. The World Literature program has a built-in niche for The Writers' Room, but once students move on to Grade 10, we rarely see them again. We also need to build stronger connections with the science and social students departments and to make The Writers' Room a catalyst for writing across the curriculum. And we need to find ways to deal with our perennial scheduling problems, creating regular days and times for coaches to work with students, so that both students [and coaches?], can have some sense of continuity.

Our story keeps changing, so check in with us a year from now. We may look entirely different. As we confront old difficulties, perceive new needs, or recognize unexpected successes, we revise ourselves. Our "readers" – the students and teachers we work with – provide ongoing feedback, and we, in turn, produce draft after draft. We're learning not to expect a definitive version of The Writers' Room. In fact, we're beginning to think that The Writers' Room is not a product but a process.