

After the Sock Factory: Collaboration between Generations in the Writing Center

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Abstract

Through awareness of the needs of nontraditional students and careful tutor training, the staff of NRCC's writing center assist students with both writing-related tasks and integration into academic life.

These students come from the hosiery mills, from the sportswear factories, from the production lines of dozens of now-departed industries; their counterparts in Mexico are sewing the clothes they used to sew, making the switchplates they used to make. Now they must learn something different in order to make a living. The Trade Readjustment Act has given them the money they need to go back to school, and so they come. They are in their late thirties, on the average, although some are near retirement age. They have families. Some of them have second jobs. Most of them have not been in an academic institution since they graduated from high school.

They come with fears — fear of failure, which would mean no new job, fear of academia, fear of unfamiliar ideas, fear born of stereotypes and preconceptions. Often how these students perform in, and indeed, whether or not they are even retained by the institution, depends on how these fears are addressed. The writing center is in a unique position to aid non-traditional students both in their writing-related tasks, and also in their task of integrating into the academic environment. Any center can become a strategic spot for helping students surmount the challenges of adapting to the strictures of academia; all it takes is an awareness of the special needs of the non-traditional student and some careful tutor training.

Such training becomes necessary when we realize that, although the term *non-traditional student* has been in use for at least two decades to describe older students returning to academia, the latter-day embodiments of the non-traditional student are very different from their earlier counterparts. Ten years ago, many returning students were emptynesters, or retirees who were fulfilling a long-term dream of earning a college degree. Many of them brought with them fairly complete ideas of what academia was and what they expected of it. Now, however, most non-traditional students come to college with a different goal — they want specific retraining for a specific career — and many of them lack a clear idea of what they expect college to be or to do for them. They tend to focus, therefore, on the immediate needs — passing a course, for example — without looking at the larger structure of what they are learning in the context of the institution. This focus on what is being learned, rather than the process of learning, can make the transition to academia more difficult for returning students who are operating under an outdated paradigm of learning as a passive process. As writers, the most frequent question they ask is "what does the professor want?" instead of the more open-ended "what do I have to say?"

In learning to address these students where they are in their process of intellectual development, writing centers meet a very real need for connection and affirmation. To really do our jobs, however, we must help students advance beyond this top-down model of learning and into patterns of critical thinking that have implications well beyond the writing classroom (Hyman). Even the career-oriented student who views learning in the most pragmatic terms will benefit from developing the life-long learning skills that non-traditional students were once presupposed to have. In her discussion of the ways schemas inform student papers, Christine Davis says, "We develop our schemas for writing primarily through reading, though speaking and listening also contribute to our sense of language and its use. Unfortunately, a large number of students who enter our classes are neither well-read nor experienced in thoughtful conversation" (par. 12). This characterization can be particularly true of non-traditional students who may have a very narrow idea of what writing is and why they need to learn to do it well. Often it just seems like one more unnecessary layer of work that must precede the "important" classes in their core curricula. The writing center benefits non-traditional students most when it helps them realize that learning does not focus only upon narrow goals, but also upon a way of life that allows them to grow and change, to adapt to changes in their worlds.

Of course, not all non-traditional students fit into neat characterizations. We still have the lifelong learners among us, and we must remember that non-traditional students defy stereotyping. Many of them need developmental classes, but not all. Many of them are not computer literate, but some are. Many of them are unfamiliar with collaborative learning and peer tutoring, but some have been using these pedagogies for years in their jobs and homes. It is difficult for classroom teachers to sort out the personal histories that inform non-traditional students' learning styles; in the writing center, however, the one-on-one contact allows the student to explain himself or herself, to experiment with new ideas, to confess real or imagined inadequacies, and to develop strategies for dealing with them. In short, the writing conference can be the beginning of critical analysis, and it can start a learning process that spills over into the student's whole academic experience.

Many returning students come to the writing center because they struggle with issues of writing and thinking, issues that their new environment forces them to confront before they can begin to work toward their goals. These struggles come both because they have not written anything in years, if ever, and because they discover that the roles of "teacher" and "learner" have changed since they were last in school, shifting more responsibility for their learning onto their own shoulders, a responsibility that they are reluctant to assume and for which they feel ill-prepared. Their last experiences with school may well have been in classrooms that practiced the "banking" model of education that Paolo Freire and Bell Hooks have both sought to debunk in their work. These students expect to come to class and have professors pour information into them, which they will then process and reiterate in essays, problems, reports (Hobson 4). They are both unfamiliar with and threatened by process learning and collaborative learning. Accustomed to regarding writing as a set of rules (grammar, syntax), applied to the facts (what the teacher wants), non-traditional students who expect the teacher to be the final authority find it difficult to think critically and to value their own synthesis of knowledge.

"I felt so *stupid*," Esther complained. At 40, she is older than many in her classes, and her work for a local hosiery mill did not prepare her for the give and take of the classroom. "Here I am, surrounded by 18-year-olds and every one of them knows what the teacher is talking about except me! I can look and look at this stuff and not get what they get out of it."

Her frustration highlights the need for center directors and coordinators need to be aware of the non-traditional student's assumptions about teaching and learning, especially as they pertain to critical analysis and writing. Most of us hire peer tutors through work-study programs that seem to employ traditional students. Professional staff need to remind these students, many of whom are just out of high school, that their non-traditional clients are just becoming aware that they do not

so much generate "right" answers in their writing, as they demonstrate a process of meaning-making They can look and look and still not "get it."

Tutors must also be aware that non-traditional students come to the writing center with varying degrees of techno-awareness. In New River Community College's (NRCC) writing center last fall, 92 percent of the non-traditional students we tutored had no previous computer experience. By requiring that papers be generated on word processors and that classwork be performed online in computerized classrooms, their professors created enormous anxieties for students who were unfamiliar with the basic layout of a keyboard. Much of their writing center time was spent learning how to use the computer, how to type, and how to perform the basic functions of word processing. While we cannot neglect this vital work, we must not allow students to believe that technical skills are all that need to be mastered. Tutors must be sensitive to non-traditional students' needs, but must also encourage them to think of writing not as merely mastering a set of skills, but also as creating meaning within their own process.

Sometimes this meaning-making can be complicated by the fact that a significant number of returning students will be placed into developmental classes designed to help them brush up on the skills that have grown rusty from disuse. While they need the skills that developmental classes espouse, the classes themselves can be problematic to non-traditional students who feel that such a placement is one more evidence of their inadequacy. Often the classes present groups of grammar rules to be learned, leaving top-down learners with the idea that if they memorize the "rules," they will create adequate prose. This approach fits into the top-down schema of education, but, again, does not well serve the intellectual development of the students. Tutors who work with students in developmental classes need to be aware of this tendency to reduce writing to rules and assist them by affirming the student's writing progress and stressing the adequacy of the student's experience (the content of writing) over the perceived inadequacy of knowledge (the rules of grammar).

Training Writing Center Tutors

A number of strategies can help tutors as they work with non-traditional students. By combining techniques of collaborative learning, peer tutoring, listening and referring, tutors can work effectively with non-traditional students to help the students reach their goals.

First, in tutor training, writing centers must stress the importance of listening. Because the goal of the writing center has been since at least the mid-1980's to "produce better writers, not better writing," (North 438), our first step has always been to listen to the writer. When that writer is a non-traditional student, however, listening becomes more difficult. The non-traditional student often expects the tutor to be the person with the answers, the lecturer, following the "top down" model that the student associates with education. Tutors must resist the urge, and frequently the urging of the student, to provide answers at the expense of improving the writer.

Listening provides another benefit to the non-traditional student. Many students come with life experiences far different from those usually associated with academic careers. These experiences form a rich mine of ideas, analogies, correlations, and life-lessons that are the building blocks of good prose. Students are often reluctant to draw on their experiences, however, feeling that the non-college parts of their lives have no value in the academic setting.

Cindy brought her first writing assignment into the Center and plopped it on the table. The grade it received, a "D," was not encouraging. "The teacher told us to describe something that happened to us," she explained. "I couldn't think of anything interesting to write about, so this paper was a little of this and a little of that. I don't have anything to say that anybody would want to read!" Diane, listening in, echoed her sentiments. "What am I going to write about when I've spent most of my life sewing sweatshirts? Nobody wants to hear about that."

Listening tutors can foster an appreciation for and reliance on this experience that will help the non-traditional student in many areas, not just in writing tasks. Many returning students do not realize that their experiences may be very interesting to others whose lives have been very different. Non-traditional students can, as they articulate their life experiences, create very meaningful writing out of the mundane, if they are encouraged to do so.

Yet another benefit of the listening tutor is that he or she can be aware of the many roles that non-traditional students play and the ways those roles may conflict with their academic work. Non-traditional students frequently find themselves struggling to balance schoolwork, family, and community responsibilities. More than traditional students, they are frequently the primary sources of income for their families and as such carry a tremendous burden to achieve. When success seems long in coming, or when yet another essay has been rejected for cryptic problems (cs, awk, frag.), the student may become discouraged. Listening tutors can suggest coping strategies within the institution — single parent support groups, career counseling, stress and time management classes, and others — that provide the student with alternatives to dropping out. This reinforcement of student support-systems improves retention and reminds the non-traditional student that he or she is not alone. It also preserves the role of the tutor as tutor, allowing tutor and student to focus on writing rather than the student's problems that may be far more serious than a tutor is equipped to handle.

Denise failed two sections of developmental English before her writing center tutor suggested testing for a learning disability. "I am so relieved to know I'm not dumb," she said. "I kept trying to tell myself I wasn't dumb, but it's hard to believe that when you keep getting 40s on tests. Now I know that I have to do things a certain way. Maybe I don't learn like other people, but I can learn."

The second set of tutor strategies involves modeling. Non-traditional students, perhaps more than other students, benefit from seeing their tutors in action as learners and thinkers. Modeling is particularly important in reading, where non-traditional students may feel threatened by the academic vocabulary they are presumed to know. Tutors can model active reading techniques, showing students how to respond to texts by underlining, writing in the margins, keeping lists of unfamiliar words, and jotting down the ideas that the text suggests to them. Tutors can also encourage their clients to practice "free reading," giving themselves a set number of minutes to read each day in texts of their choice, without stopping. Tutor and student can periodically review the student's reading to further reinforce the skills practice, and both tutor and student can enjoy the discussions of the texts.

The close contact that tutors have with their non-traditional clients allows them to observe the learning styles that best suit a particular student. Tutors do not have to be steeped in theory to recognize that Beverly likes to work with written words while Kevin talks through his writing problems and Anne draws diagrams. When tutors identify a learning style that suits a particular student, they can help that student apply the style to writing and also give him or her confidence to use it in other areas. Tutors must keep in mind that non-traditional students who come from manufacturing backgrounds, particularly, tend to look for one correct way to do something, whether it's attaching a motor or learning to write. These students must often be encouraged again and again to step outside the box, the schema they have created for themselves about writing and do what works for them regardless of whether it seems "right" or follows some unspoken "rules."

"You've got to get me some software," Drew said, bursting into the room. "We're going to be graded on grammar and I don't know any grammar. I gotta practice." For Drew, success in his business writing class came coupled with memorizing rules of grammar. He struggled to detach himself from the rules long enough to see the importance of the content of his work.

Tutors who are willing to help non-traditional students step "outside the box," must not, as a final point, assume that their experiences are the defining ones for college students. Tutors must

explore their own schemas and start to think of their fellow students as a diverse group with many different, equally valid, experiences and ways of learning. By carefully listening and modeling, the tutor grows along with the client, creating an atmosphere where there can be a peer relationship — one between people who are not connected generationally, but who are connected as learners. That is the connection that writing centers seek to foster for all students, and in the collaboration of traditional and non-traditional students such a connection may have found its natural habitat.

"You know," Diane said, "I didn't think I'd like working with Paul. My son is older than he is. But guess what? After we'd been working for a week or so, it seemed like I just forgot all about how old he was. He just let me talk and then when I had a question, he'd answer it. Now if we can just get through [English] 112!"

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