

Writing Center Tutor Training: What Is Transferable across Academic Cultures?

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Abstract

Essay collections frequently employed in US composition courses can be an awkward fit when applied to the teaching of writing outside US academic culture. In similar fashion, peer tutor training manuals employed in US writing centers rest on assumptions about academic writing and writing center practice which are grounded in American academic culture. In particular, the processes and foci of Anglo-American and Continental writing display significant differences in terms of both epistemology and practice. An increasingly international writing center practice demands elucidation of theory and practice which might best facilitate the work of new tutors and better conform to local academic practices and needs.

When I began teaching in the English department at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) in 1997, I taught the first fall semester with the books which had been on order and in shipment the June I was hired. In line with a curriculum modeled on that of a small US liberal arts college, AUBG required all entering students to enroll in either one or two composition classes in their first year of undergraduate study, a requirement without model or precedent in other European post-secondary institutions. Writing in these courses frequently derives from response to contemporary essays or excerpts from longer texts, with the intention of teaching early undergraduates skills in critical

reading and argumentation transferable to both civic discourse and disciplinary study in later undergraduate courses. Our readings in *AUB 101 Expository Writing* that fall semester were drawn from the *Norton Reader*, an anthology of nonfiction. The first essay I can recall assigning was a Lars Eighner piece on dumpster diving, offering details and technical advice on how to live a life in the United States sustained by other people's discarded foodstuff and junk.

In retrospect it seems like a strange essay to have assigned to classes full of Bulgarian, Romanian, and Albanian students, to students from the former Yugoslavia and from across the southern tier of

former Soviet states, and even more so when I recall the experience of my first Bulgarian winter, the air of Blagoevgrad perfumed with the scent of hundreds of dumpsters smoldering and occasionally bursting into flames with a combination of household trash and hot furnace ashes deposited from homes and apartment buildings each morning. I soon went looking for a first year composition anthology which offered readings more germane to the lives of our enrolled students. «Multi-cultural» anthologies were popular among US publishers, but I found that the multi-culturalism under the glass in these collections seemed limited to the varieties of multi-culturalism present and visible within the boundaries of the continental United States. I eventually settled on David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*, with selections from Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire, a challenging mix of more global perspectives and authors. But I never did find a truly international first year composition anthology; without a need or market to exploit among European universities, there has simply never been motivation for publishers to pursue this sort of anthology.

One of my tasks as a faculty member in the English department was to establish a functional writing center at AUBG. As with our composition course requirements, we were a European institution engaging in American post-secondary education practice, and writing centers were a standard institution feature of colleges and universities in the United States. In American writing centers, training for undergraduate peer tutors frequently took the form of a credit-bearing course which apprentice tutors enrolled in prior to taking writing center staff positions; commonly assigned texts in such courses today include Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood's *St Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner's *Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, and Ben Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide*. Writing center training in the United States is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology, which argues that knowledge is socially created, and that the act of writing as knowledge-creation is achieved in conversation with other voices, be they textual or embodied in physical interlocutors. Much of the training which peer tutors engage in centers on generating productive, heuristic dialog.

Without a credit-bearing course in place and with the semester underway, I duplicated available essays for the small group of prospective AUBG tutors who had answered my call, and we began late afternoon

discussions of texts central to writing center theory and practice, such as Stephen North's «The Idea of a Writing Center» (1984) and Jeff Brooks' «Minimalist Tutoring» (1991). The prospective tutors were all fine writers; they had been recommended by faculty for the positions. But their vision of what tutoring entailed conflicted considerably with the theories of tutoring we were reading. Brooks, for instance, insisted that «when you <improve> a student's paper, you haven't been a tutor at all» (169). «Improving» a fellow student's paper was frankly and exactly what our tutors expected to be engaged in as writing center tutors. Brooks' minimalist approach to tutoring, his stated desire to do anything to avoid becoming an editor of student work, seemed dubious practical advice to my new tutors, who had been educated in Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian, and Serbian school systems and had succeeded to this point in their education by adapting to a prescriptive and directive pedagogy. Certainly, students would revolt, or simply refuse to use the AUBG Writing Center, if our tutors refused to help students directly, rather than serve as a «living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend time with his paper» (Brooks 169). As one of our tutors, Elton Skendaj, noted: «My Albanian cultural heritage calls for direct intervention in many cases when certain forms of expertise need to be imparted from tutor to client.»

These initial discussions with my AUBG tutors took place almost a dozen years ago, prior to the founding of the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA), and not soon after the formation of the first writing center in Germany, in 1993, at the University of Bielefeld, under the supervision and direction of Andrea Frank and Gabriela Ruhmann (Brauer «Drawing» 62). In the intervening years, the work of Gerd Brauer («Drawing»; «Centres»; «Role») and other European academic writing scholars, represented notably in the edited collection *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education* (Kluwer 2003), has helped educate faculty such as myself, whose on the job training in work with European writers was a process filled with trial and error. Professional organizations such as the EWCA and the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) have provided conference forums and an ongoing, networked discussion of global practices in writing instruction. In the course of the past dozen years, I've come to better understand that the work I engaged in at AUBG, as challenging (and exhilarating) as it proved to be, was a relatively straightforward

task. Students enrolled at AUBG in order to experience an American-style education. Despite the fact that our faculty was a multinational group, this is what we offered our students: an American undergraduate education in southeastern Europe. What has proven in subsequent years to be an issue of greater complexity, and the source of burgeoning discussion, is the degree to which writing pedagogy, and in particular, the pedagogy employed in American writing centers, is of value or utility in informing the developing practice of the teaching of academic writing, and in particular, writing center-based practice, within continental European post-secondary institutions.

Lotte Reinecker and Peter Stray Jorgensen, who have been addressing the need and demand for instruction in academic writing at the University of Copenhagen's Writing Center for over a decade, articulate the complexity and interwoven nature of «Continental» and «Anglo-American» post-secondary writing practice:

Anglo-American, and especially American university writing, and the teaching of it, is heavily influenced by rhetoric and rhetorical text-concerns such as purpose, aim, reader, focus, structure, and argumentation. (The ironic part of it is that classical rhetoric is very much a European «invention». Rhetoric seems to have been almost forgotten in continental European academic writing, while American and British teachers of writing have reintroduced the classical rhetoricians).

(«The(Im)Possibilities» 105)

In Reinecker and Jorgensen's reading, the writing tasks required of post-secondary students in Anglo-American and Continental universities and colleges differ quite significantly. Continental writing tends to foreground ideas and complex sources; Anglo-American writing focuses on problems and observable, empirical matters. Continental writing is characterized by multiple, diffuse points and discursive structures; Anglo-American writing frequently focuses on a single primary point and proceeds in a linear fashion. A colleague of Reinecker and Jorgensen notes that «[w]e do not instruct before writing, our [Continental] students are supposed to sit at the feet of their masters and absorb their writing themes and styles» (108). Learning to write in a Continental university is thus seen as a mimetic process, and advice is more likely to be conveyed indirectly and by example than by the direct instruction and dialogic

intervention of American writing courses and writing centers.

Granting the copious variations in how writing centers manifest themselves in given national and academic cultures, writing centers, as they are envisioned and developing in Continental university practice, share some structural features with a typical American writing center:

- Writing centers in both the Continental and American model serve writers across academic disciplines;
- Writing centers in both academic cultures acknowledge a variety of disciplinary writing practices – a «one-size-fits-all» approach to writing instruction is prevalent in neither culture;
- Writing centers in both cultures acknowledge the value of face-to-face consultation in regard to writing in progress;
- Writing instruction in both cultures acknowledge that writing in the university presents particular challenges to recently matriculating students.

That said, significant differences exist between writing centers as they have developed in the United States and writing centers as they are developing in European practice. Differing practices and institutional positions, typical though not universal, include these:

- Most American writing centers stand in support of writing programs which include composition or writing intensive course instruction as mandatory features of an undergraduate curriculum. In most Continental writing centers, the writing center *is* the writing program, and few if any designated writing courses are offered, let alone mandated;
- Many American writing centers are largely and sometimes exclusively staffed by peer tutors, under the direction of professional staff or faculty. While this practice is growing in Continental writing centers, a professional staff model seems dominant in Continental writing centers;
- The focus in writing center practice evidenced in collections such as *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education* is as much on faculty development as it is on tutoring (see Kramer, van Kruiningen, and Padmos; Frank, Haacke, and Tente). This is in line with the observation that writing centers *are* the writing program in Continental settings. These issues are frequently taken up in

faculty-driven Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiatives in American colleges and universities;

- The notion of «academic writing as art and inborn abilities» (Reinecker and Jorgensen 103) remains a strongly held sentiment in Continental universities. As Brauer notes in explaining to American tutors what they might encounter in working with a German student, «[t]he student envisions text feedback as something done only after he has finished writing and as surface editing mainly in regard to spelling and grammar («Role» 187). This variety of strictly editorial advice is frequently discouraged in American writing center tutorials;
- Writing center work as manifested in tutorial practice may be inclined toward a more prescriptive style in Continental contexts. Reinecker and Jorgensen note that instruction in the Anglo-American tradition, applied in a European context, «can be taken care of by writing tutors (who may even be students and can relatively easily be instructed on what to tell the young writers)» (107). American writing center practice and peer tutor training tends to emphasize the heuristic and dialogic over prescriptive advice (see Bruffee), which is held in a disregard similar to the practice of editing student writing.

These distinctions being the case, what does the practice of tutor training as exercised in many American writing centers have to offer writing center practice in a Continental context?

In the fall of 1998 at AUBG, our staff discussion came to something of a head in response to Irene Clark and Dave Healy's 1996 essay «Are Writing Centers Ethical?» Clark and Healy's essay offered a series of questions which poked hard at what seemed at the time to be an almost monolithic obeisance to non-directive tutoring practice. Our tutors not only agreed with virtually all points in Clark and Healy's critique of a minimalist, non-directive tutoring practice, but extended that critique to both our local circumstances and our cultural context. Among the sentiments expressed by AUBG undergraduate peer tutors:

The AUBG writing center is a contact zone for many Eastern European students who are learning about the process of writing. Western perceptions about writing as a solitary exercise reflect the importance attached to the individual in the West.

When the focus of an ESL tutorial is style or mechanics, minimalist tactics are rarely effective. It is frustrating for both parties when a tutor repeatedly tries to «bring knowledge out» of his tutee, yet the vessel turns out to be empty.

If we as tutors comply with limitations put on us by clients, then the question arises: how much do we respect our position as objective readers and commentators? Does it hurt our sense of responsibility to deliberately overlook certain parts of an essay simply because we have been told so by the author?

It is not only classroom instructors, as Clark and Healy stress, who disapprove of collaboration. It is students themselves who are sometimes reluctant to collaborate.

While non-directive tutoring remains a strategy central to an American vision of writing center work, its hegemony has been disrupted considerably in writing center practice over the past decade. But my point in quoting extensively from this rich vein of feedback is this: in 1998, a small group of tutors in southeastern Bulgaria, new to tutoring and to American-style education practices, articulated in sharp and pressing terms some of the limits of what can be transferred across cultural boundaries in writing center work.

Given the differences Reinecker and Jorgensen note between Anglo-American and Continental rhetorics and pedagogical practices, or given the perspectives conveyed by AUBG tutors in response to Clark and Healy's demand for a more transparent and direct interchange of ideas in writing center practice, just what is transferable in writing center training? Perhaps this question is best addressed by considering which *ideas* of a writing center seem to cross borders and bear on practice in a more universal sense. Most writing centers, regardless of site or cultural context,

- Address an academic author's need or desire for an attentive and responsive audience during initial, intermediate, and late stages of a writing project;
- Work on real-time, finite writing tasks and challenges;
- Grant disciplinary differences in writing styles and ways of creating, revealing, and documenting understanding and authority;

- Grant the authorship of any writing addressed, ultimately, to the student author of that writing.

From this state of affairs, a number of practices and desired outcomes in writing center training can be better identified.

- Tutors need to be trained in listening to writers. This is neither a neutral nor passive activity, nor does it come naturally to all tutors.
- Tutors need to be prepared to brainstorm ideas with writers at the inception of a writing project, help students organize or reorganize material as they proceed, and collaborate on editing as writing approaches its final stage.
- Tutors need to learn to query students prior to launching into a particular writing task, to discuss the task at hand in order to better determine the nature of a writing task and the student writer's position in regard to the task.
- Tutors need to be trained in accessing and assessing resources, e. g. electronic source retrieval databases or style and reference guides, so that they might direct student writers to better utilize these resources.
- Tutors should be exposed to a variety of academic genres and discouraged from imagining that their own academic writing practice is universally applicable.
- Tutors should be encouraged to consider the ethical and practical limits of their practice as facilitators of the writing of others.

Few of the hundreds of writing centers in American post-secondary institutions are physically identical, but the vast majority share a common mission and *modus operandi*: the offering of one-to-one consultation with students. A Continental writing center, on the other hand, might focus primarily on tutoring students engaged in advanced or discipline specific seminar writing, or focus on the writing in a specific discipline, such as a School of Education, or might be largely engaged in work with faculty, or might be dedicated to working on basic, intermediate, and advanced second language acquisition, or might be offering a series of classes or workshops. A tutor training manual relevant to these varied tasks would warrant addressing in some depth not only traditional face-to-face interaction, but second language development and learning, the

practice of discipline-specific tutoring, collaborative learning, and theories of composition, rhetoric, and academic genre. Given the variety of manifestations, purposes, and institutional positions which Continental writing centers inhabit, the likelihood of a single text which would embrace the variety of Continental writing center practice is unlikely. One or more of the aforementioned texts common to American writing center training would undoubtedly prove an interesting point of departure, a means by which to interrogate the distinctions between the local practices of a European writing center and American progenitors. There are sufficient commonalities in writing center practice across educational cultures such that a careful reading of Murphy and Sherwood, or Gillespie and Lerner, or of Rafoth's essay collections would yield much in terms of both explicit guidance and provocative assertions, as was the case when the AUBG tutoring staff considered, then considered applying advice on American writing center practice in a southeastern European context. But as I found to be the case with anthologies of nonfiction applied in this context, there is no easy or ready-made match. Writing center work, like dumpster diving, is profoundly local practice.

David Foster, in his 2002 edited collection with David Russell and in his single authored *Writing With Authority: Students' Roles as Writers in Cross-National Perspective*, offers a comparative analysis of advanced American and German undergraduate writers which supports the dramatic distinctions drawn by Reinecker and Jorgensen. Foster notes that the writing of German undergraduates is characterized by a great degree of autonomy, by a notion of *Einsamkeit und Freiheit* (solitude and freedom) in the writing process, and by «self-direction, long-term goal setting, and cumulative, recursive task development and writing» (27).

In Foster's case studies, German students engaged in weeks or months of composing in contrast to American students, whose commitment to writing in similar advanced courses amounted to a few days or just hours in a single day. But the freedom and commitment characteristic of German undergraduate writing was frequently accompanied by an anxiety and dissonance stemming from the university seminar's departure from the more structured writing leading to the university qualifying *Arbitur* exams. As one undergraduate writer profiled in Foster's study notes,

You sit at home alone and you have nobody who

knows about your topic who you can talk with. Normally you don't have anybody near you who can tell you this is a bad structure, this is not the required way of citing, so you have to do it all on your own. And you have to force yourself to make progress and keep on doing it. (93)

This is clearly a student in need of a writing center. But what sort of advice and direction do we offer tutors who work in this writing center? This is *not* a rhetorical question – writing centers at German universities are increasingly serving the needs of students like those profiled in Foster's study. What advice drawn from current tutor training manuals has been valuable to tutors working in the varied academic cultures we inhabit? What advice is critiqued and modified, or rejected outright, an option played out by undergraduate writing tutors I worked with a decade ago in Bulgaria. If, as Harvey Kail has suggested, «a tutor training manual might also be viewed as a kind of master narrative, an educational creation myth» (74), how is this story unfolding in writing centers around the world? How is the literature of tutor training being recreated in diverse, global contexts? Conversations in this regard are needed – to share and to learn from each other, to engage in both an adventure and a quest (in Kail's reading), and to return to our local concerns – the always local work of writing centers – both enriched and redirected by the stories of others.

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