

Tutoring Peer Writers
EngCmp 1210
Course Description
2003
Jean Grace

In "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers," Marilyn Cooper argues that "Writing centers are and can be at the heart of our joint inquiry into the functions of literacy in our society. We need to make better use of these 'border' spaces within our institutions, spaces where the lines of power blur and the demands of discipline and evaluation weaken in ways that allow us to create together better ways of writing and of teaching writing" (348). Cooper here suggests a direction of inquiry that we will take up in this class. The writing center is part of the project of the teaching of composition at the university level, and our work presents some interesting tensions, problems, and possibilities that we'll explore together this term. You might think about the Writing Center as a site of teaching, writing, and reading. We are concerned not just with the learning of the students who come to us for tutorials, but also with the peer tutors and grad students who work in the Center. And since most of us write--in different genres for different purposes and audiences--it is a place where the consultants are engaged with their own writing problems and processes, with the reading that informs their own writing, and with scholarship on the teaching of writing.

This term you will be introduced to the work of the Writing Center from the perspectives of tutor, student, and scholar. You'll visit the Writing Center to observe tutorials, to interview tutors, and to work with consultants. In class, you will work with your colleagues, helping them with their writing projects and presenting some key writing, revising, and editing issues to them. You'll read a lot about writing center and composition theory so that you have a theoretical framework for understanding the work of a writing center. And you will be thinking about the character of composition at Pitt, so that you can better understand the context within which you are learning and teaching.

This course is both demanding and rewarding. Students who have taken the course have found that it helps them better understand and improve their own writing, teaches them how to make use of research in their writing, improves their listening skills, allows them to think through teaching issues by inhabiting both teacher and student roles, makes them better collaborators in school projects and on the job, and gives them a more informed perspective on the teaching of composition at the university.

Students who satisfactorily complete this course may apply for an internship in the Writing Center in the spring term. Interns get 3 credits plus a \$200 stipend, and they tutor three hours a week, attend a weekly meeting, read further scholarship on writing center theory, and either substantially revise their research paper from this course or draft a new research paper. After the internship, peer tutors may apply to work in the Writing Center for eleven hours a week (10 hours of tutoring, 1 hour meeting) at an hourly rate that exceeds minimum wage.

Your Work for the Course

You'll interview a consultant, observe tutorials, keep a journal, write two 4- to 5-page essays, and write a 10- to 12-page research paper.

We will use the portfolio system for grading--at the end of the term, you'll give me a portfolio of your collected work, including your research paper, journal, and a cover letter explaining whether you want to tutor in the Writing Center and why or why not. Your participation grade will also be factored into your portfolio grade. If at any point during the term you'd like to discuss your work, let me know. At midterm I will give you a provisional grade. I will notify any students who are failing the class as early as possible in the term.

Classroom Practices

Our class will be built around your work and our reading. I'll photocopy examples of your work for our review, and we'll discuss how, as readers, we respond to those documents--what parts work (and why they are so effective for us), where we run into problems, what issues they raise. We'll consider the implications of particular ways of writing and the strengths and liabilities offered by individual approaches. In addition to workshopping texts written by people in the class, we will discuss approaches to writing center practices and theory.

Because part of your work in the course is to offer useful and intelligent feedback to your colleagues in class, your attendance and participation is mandatory. Attendance at all classes and occasional participation (one or two comments per class) usually equals a C (adequate) attendance and participation grade. Meaningful and consistent participation in class will raise that grade; non-participation, disruptiveness, and excessive absence or lateness will lower it.

If you miss three or more classes (the equivalent of three weeks of class), you are subject to failure and should withdraw as soon as possible.

If you miss class for any reason, it is your responsibility to get in touch with classmates to find out what you missed (find a couple people whom you trust to take good notes).

Journals

In your journals, I'll expect to see thoughtful reflection on the texts we are reading, on your experiences observing tutorial sessions and interviewing consultants, and on your experience as a tutor in class and in your co-tutoring sessions at the end of term. Periodically, I may also assign other topics to write on and will specify a word count. In general, you should plan to write at least 750 words every week in your journal. Please

date your entries and refer to page numbers in the texts you are reading (this will allow you to make better use of your journal when you are writing).

What You Need

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors, 3rd edition, Leigh Ryan

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice, Robert Barnett and Jacob Blumner

Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 7th edition, Joseph Williams

LB Brief

Course packet for this course

Writing Center Meetings

The Writing Center staff meets regularly on Wednesdays from 12-1. Some of these meetings won't be relevant to you at this point, but if you choose to work in the Writing Center next term, regular meetings will be mandatory. This term, I will suggest specific meetings that I think will be useful to you--both to get you acquainted with the staff and supplement your learning.

Academic Integrity

According to Pitt's Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom (February 1974),

The integrity of the academic process requires fair and impartial evaluation on the part of faculty and honest academic conduct on the part of students. To this end, students are expected to conduct themselves at a high level of responsibility in the fulfillment of the course of their study. It is the corresponding responsibility of faculty to make clear to students those standards by which students will be evaluated, and the resources permissible for use by students during the course of their study and evaluation. The educational process is perceived as a joint faculty-student enterprise which will perforce involve professional judgment by faculty and may involve—without penalty—reasoned exception by students to the data or views offered by faculty.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this class. We will discuss what plagiarism is and how you can adequately document the help you get from others on your writing. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted above, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process that I will initiate. A minimum sanction of a failing grade for the paper or project will be imposed.

Disability Resources

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union (412) 624-7890 as early as possible in the term.

Syllabus

Readings are from these texts:

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors, 3rd edition, Leigh Ryan

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice, Barnett and Blumner

Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 7th edition, Joseph Williams

LB Brief

Course packet for this course

Week 1

- Introduction
- Due Aug. 29 Read Ryan, chapters 1 through 3
- Read staff sequence for Seminar in Composition. At least 20 to 30 sections of SC will use this sequence. If you work in the Writing Center in the spring term, you can expect to work with some students who are responding to these assignments. We will think about what work students are being asked to do and why. What relationship between reading and writing is assumed by the sequence of assignments? How do you account for the choices of reading material and writing tasks that you see here?
- Read Adrienne Rich essay (course pkt)

Week 2

- Read "The Idea of a Writing Center," Stephen M. North (B&B p. 63) and "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center'" (78)
- Read "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," Andrea Lunsford (B&B 92)
- Interview with a Writing Center consultant due.

Week 3

- Read Chapters 4 through 6, Ryan
- Rich Assignment--3-5 typed pages (assgn. 4 on p. 648 in course pkt.)
- Bring a paper of yours to class (it should be from within the past 5 years). I'll make a copies for you to use in upcoming exercises.

Week 4

- Read chapters 7 and 8 in Ryan
- Be prepared to discuss Lessons 1 and 2, Williams
- Choose a sentence- or paragraph- level issue that you would like to know more about or a handbook issue from exercise 4C in Ryan. Prepare a short explanation (under 5 minutes) that you can do without notes to help another student better understand the issue. You'll try out your explanation in class today.
- Observation #1 due in class on Thursday

Week 5

- Lesson 3, Williams; Exercises 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 due in class
- Be prepared to discuss the composition articles in the course packet (Bartholomae, Coles, Shaughnessey). What do you understand the work of composition to be based on these texts? What makes you give the answer you do? (Have specific moments in the texts to talk about.)
- Choose a sentence- or paragraph- level issue that you would like to know more about or a handbook issue from exercise 4C in Ryan. Prepare a short explanation (under 5 minutes) that you can do without notes to help another student better understand the issue. You'll try out your explanation in class today.

Week 6

- Bring in a paper that you are currently working on for a different class or for this one. If you don't have a current project, you can bring an old paper, but be prepared to talk about it as though it is a current project. You will tutor a classmate in real-time (a 25-minute session).
- Observation #2 due in class on Oct. 3. Bring Williams to class with you on 10/3.
- We will start be reading theoretical articles intensely for the next few weeks. Read Christina Murphy's "The Writing Center and Social Constructionist Theory" (B&B 100) and Kenneth Bruffee's "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" (206).

When you are reading essays (for this class and for upcoming classes) please take notes on each essay so that you'll be able to discuss your responses to these questions:

What do you understand the writer's argument to be?

How do you respond?

Where in the text do you find support for your reading or interpretation of it?

Where are the key moments of the text for you?

What assumptions is the writer making about writing center work and/or the work of composition?

What assumptions is the writer making about the teaching of writing?

What questions does the essay raise for you?

Because next week we will be spending one class with you tutoring each other in real-time and we'll be doing mid-term conferences, you have plenty of time to get started on your reading for week 8: read in B&B Julie Neff, "Learning Disabilities and the Writing

Center" (376), Anne DiPardo "Whispers of Coming and Going: Lessons from Fannie" (350), Jeff Brooks "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" (219).

Week 7

Tuesday's class will be in the Writing Center. Bring a paper and be prepared to be tutored and to be a tutor.

Midterm conferences this week. Bring your journal.

Week 8

For Tuesday, read and be prepared to use Williams, lesson 4
In B&B read Thomas Newkirk "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in Writing Conference" (302), Kristin Walker "Difficult Clients and Tutor Dependency: Helping Overly Dependent Clients Become More Independent Writers" (316).

Week 9

In B&B, Marilyn Cooper, "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers" (335).

Week 10

In B&B, read Judith Powers "Rethinking WC Conferencing Strategies for the ESL Writer" (368) and ESL handouts. Read Williams Lesson 5.

Week 11

Your essay on 2 or 3 articles about writing center theory is due.
For next week: read history essays: Robert Moore: "The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory" (B&B 3), Joyce Kinkead "The National Writing Center Association as Mooring: A Personal History of the First decade" (29), Elizabeth Boquet "'Our Little Secret': A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions" (41).

Week 12

For next week: read Williams Lesson 6

Week 13

First draft of your research paper is due.
For your final portfolio, you need to do either two co-tutoring sessions in the Writing Center or two observations (you choose which you feel most comfortable with at this point--either option is fine with me). We'll discuss this further in class. These sessions may take place during weeks 13, 14, or 15. Neither co-tutoring nor observations can be of Composition Tutorial students, since by now they have a very well established relationship with their consultants and these are hard to observe this late in the term. Peer tutors don't work with CT students at the Writing Center.

Week 14

Williams Lesson 7

Week 15

Your final draft of your research paper is due during finals week.

Short Assignment One Interview of a Consultant

For this assignment, call the Writing Center (412 624-6556) and make an appointment to interview a consultant. You will have a half-hour for your interview. This is your opportunity to find out more about what you are getting into. In class, we will spend some time talking about interviewing. Remember to take good notes. Here are some starter questions--you may think of others.

How long have you worked in the Writing Center?
What do you most like about it and why?
What are the biggest challenges?
What do you wish you had known when you started your first tutorial?
What advice would you offer new tutors?
What has most surprised you about working in the Center?
What strategies have you used to learn how to be a more effective consultant?
What writing issues come up fairly regularly for students? Have you developed especially effective explanations or teaching moments for any of these issues?
How does your own writing life inform the work you do at the Center?

When you write about your interview, don't just report questions and answers, but allow us to understand something after reading your interview that we may not have understood before. A least two pages, typed.

Journal Assignment A Tutorial Experience 500 words

Go to the Writing Center as a student with an assignment (either for this class or another one). Give some thought ahead of time to what you want of this session--what will make this a useful session for you? After your session, be sure to reflect on your experience in your journal. What about the experience was helpful? How was the experience different from what you expected?

Short Assignments Two and Three Typed Observation Reports

For this assignment, please go to the Writing Center and observe two sessions--one this week and one next week. Sandy Foster, our receptionist at the Center, will match you with a consultant who is willing to be observed. Call Sandy at (412) 624-6556 and make an appointment so that the consultant will know when to expect you. You will need to ask the student's permission as well: make clear that you aren't observing the student in particular, but that you're learning how to be a tutor by observing randomly chosen

tutorials (if the student says no, you'll need to observe a different tutorial). Don't observe two Composition Tutorial sessions--since peer tutors don't work with CT students, I'd prefer that you observe walk-in students.

Write two to three pages about each observation. Here are some things to pay attention to while you observe (not an exhaustive list):

- body language of consultant and student
- who controls the paper and pen
- how a session gets started
- how a consultant handles problems that come up
- how a pair negotiates the work to be done
- how a session is paced
- what a student is like at the beginning of a session compared to the end. How do you account for what you notice?
- how a session ends
- how the assignment and text (reading, film, or experience, for example) figure in the session
- how suggestions are offered
- how the student and consultant respond to each other when they talk
- how the handbook or other "expert" text is used
- what the strengths and limitations of the session were

End your account by reflecting on what you learned from your observation. For the sake of anonymity (this assignment is about your learning process, not about surveillance of the Writing Center staff), give the tutor and student pseudonyms. Some consultants may want to talk to you about your observation experience.

Attached, you'll find an example of an observation that we will discuss in our next class. Be prepared to talk about it.

Observation

For my second observation, I watched Diane (name changed to preserve anonymity) tutor a general writing intensive student who she meets with weekly. The student forgot to bring work with him, so initially they didn't have anything to discuss. Diane suggested that the student go to a computer and print out his assignment for next week from his email. They spent the rest of the session discussing his next essay, which was about theories about different ways of reading. There was a copy of the general writing textbook in the writing center so they could look up the essay.

The assignment description was more than a page long and filled with many different questions. Diane tried to help the student think about the text more thoroughly so he could answer the questions. She tried not to make him feel stupid for not understanding parts of the assignment. For example, she said, “This is a hard topic. It’s English major stuff,” and “This assignment is hard to read, it makes me dizzy.” The student told her that he liked that the teacher included so many questions in the assignment, but he was vague and stammered a little bit and I thought it was difficult to understand his point. Diane asked him, “Can you tell me a little bit more about why you liked it?” and the student explained that it’s easier when the assignment is broken down into smaller parts instead of being overwhelmed with a very general topic.

The assignment asked the student to describe the difference between a “common” and “complex” reading of a short story, which generally means the differences between reading for entertainment versus analyzing the different elements of a story. Diane explained the term “suspend disbelief” to describe reading for enjoyment. She explained that when watching the movie *Jurassic Park*, it wouldn’t be as much fun to sit through the movie and complain that none of the plot events are plausible and that dinosaurs don’t really exist. The student responded by saying that reading the short story “The Lottery” was the same way. He described a scene where a woman is stoned to death. Diane asked him, “How? What’s the tie-in?” The student explained that there were hints throughout the story that the woman would be stoned (for example, some village children were playing with stones). He meant that someone who was reading in a more “complex” would pick up on this use of foreshadowing, not that stoning does not exist, like dinosaurs don’t.

Near the end of the session, Diane asked the student to make notes about what they discussed, so he wouldn’t forget anything they talked about. The students spent about five minutes writing and filled up about a page with ideas. Diane told me later that they would spend the next week discussing the finished essay. She said she liked having the chance to vary the activity of the weekly tutoring sessions, and she doesn’t mind not working on a draft or paper when the student doesn’t have anything current

Last time I went to the writing center, I observed the first meeting between a tutor and a GWI student he will meet with every week for the rest of the semester. I thought it

was interesting to compare this to my second observation, because Diane and her student have been meeting with each other for a few weeks and are more familiar with each other. I thought the dynamics between Diane and her student were much more relaxed and comfortable. Diane was much more business-oriented than the first tutor and she focused only about the assignment, but she still seemed to have a good relationship with the student. It seemed like Diane built up a trust level with her student more by giving him helpful insights than by making very much small talk. However, I'm sure that all students relate to tutors in different ways and that some would like a tutor that plays more of a friend role.

Both of the students I observed in the writing center came unprepared (maybe because they only have to come in to pass their writing classes). The first time, the student had blown off his previous appointment without calling in to cancel. The second time, the student forgot to bring his current essay. Both tutors were very kind and did not criticize the students. Diane suggested that they use the writing center computers to find the student's next writing assignment and the writing center's copy of the general writing class textbook. I thought she was smart to use the writing center resources to find things to work on.

I also found it interesting that both tutors I observed used movie analogies to relate to reading. The first tutor described the way *Pulp Fiction*'s theme about disorder related to its chaotic plot sequence (but an essay has a different purpose, so it must be well-structured), while Diane brought up *Jurassic Park* to explain the idea of "suspending disbelief." I didn't really know what suspending disbelief meant before, but I thought Diane's example made it very clear. I think that many students, like me, are more familiar with movies than books because many of us watch more movies than read books for entertainment. Also, it's easy to come up with examples of movies that most people have seen, or at least know about. As long as the students don't feel like they are being given a dumbed-down analysis, I think it can sometimes be helpful to relate reading to movies.

It seemed as if of the most helpful things Diane did was asking the student frequent questions about what he was saying. Sometimes I had a difficult time trying to understand his points, but she would ask him "how?" or "can you say more about that?"

and his ideas would instantly become clearer. For example, when he was talking about stoning and suspending disbelief, I didn't understand the connection he was making between the two (While of course I've never seen a stoning, I think it unfortunately does happen in some places). After Diane asked him to clarify, I understood what he meant and his point about foreshadowing was insightful. I think talking to Diane helped him focus his ideas and will make it easier for him to state them clearly when he goes to write the paper.

I also thought it was helpful that Diane asked the student to write down his ideas at the end of the tutoring session. This might offer him proof of what they accomplished and will prevent him from forgetting anything. She could have also asked him to keep notes while they were talking, but I think taking notes afterwards will allow him to focus on only the most important insights and connections they made with in the reading.

Writing Assignment
Defining and Exploring a Problem
4 pages

We have looked at a range of composition and writing center theory over the past several weeks. As we have noticed in class, a lot of themes can be traced through these theoretical texts. For this assignment, your job is to write an essay in which you draw on two or three of the essays we have read and write about a set of problems, ideas, or themes that interest you. This assignment gives you the opportunity to work out some connections among texts and may inform your final paper (which could take up in further detail the issues you focus on in this assignment). We'll talk more about this project in class.

Writing Assignment
Research Paper
10 to 12 pages

We will spend class time together developing your concept for your research papers. This paper is an opportunity for you to explore in some depth a particular problem or issue in writing center work or an aspect of the work that you'd like to know more about. You may incorporate the reading we have done in class as well as some additional research on your topic. You can find many resources on-line via the Writing Center staff

site and you can find books on Writing Center theory at Hillman library. The Writing Center also has many books on writing center theory that you are welcome to consult in the Writing Center. We have back issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, as well. You should use the Writing Center at least once during your work on your paper. If you are an intern in the Center next term, you may develop the research you begin this term or you may take up a different subject.