

11 Types of Student Clients

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A secondary school writing center is for all the students at the school. We say it, and we believe it. What we mean, of course, is that the help is available for all. But not all students will voluntarily drop in for help, and not all students will need the same kind of help.

Early in the planning stages of the Madeira High School Writing Assistance Program, in Cincinnati, Ohio, we decided that, while the center would be available for all, we would focus in particular on two groups of students—those who especially wanted writing assistance and those who especially needed it. Maxine Hairston had identified two groups who benefit most from individual conferences: “highly motivated individuals who, regardless of the grades he or she is making, truly want to improve” and “borderline C-/D students who are hovering on the edge of disaster” (Hairston 1982, 11).

Is there a time to require *all* students to come for a conference? Yes, at the beginning of the school year, especially if the center is new and students don't know what to expect. And, yes, when students are working on long major projects such as research papers. Individual conferences help in such cases when there are so many tasks involved, so many things that can go wrong, so much that's unique about each individual student's work that can't be addressed in a classroom setting.

Before discussing specific kinds of students served by a center, it is important to point out that, at Madeira, as we trained our teachers to do individual conferencing, we especially emphasized the need to avoid taking possession of the student's writing. We reinforced ourselves with this cautionary note periodically. Our purpose was to train student writers to improve their writing skills rather than to “fix” particular pieces of writing for them. Student comments like the following helped us know we were on the right track: “The teacher was able to bring ideas out of my head without telling me directly what to write my paper on. She was then able to help me put my

ideas in order that would best fit the paper. . . . In a final sense, the teacher was able to make me work to get my ideas down on paper." Another student commented that the center is "not an easy way out of your writing assignments." She continued, "The teachers just don't blurt out the answers to your questions, but they help you to form your own ideas. This makes you think."

At Madeira we made a special effort to entice our very best students into the lab, partly because they would benefit from our help and partly because we wanted our student body to notice that even the best students come to the center. Because the tutors at Madeira are teachers rather than peers, we could offer constructive help even to senior advanced placement students, who often came in to talk about essays they were writing for college scholarship applications. These students, who usually had a long string of talents and accomplishments to describe, sometimes weren't sure just how to start or shape these essays that had such important, potential consequences. One fellow teacher noted that even valedictorians have come for writing assistance as they prepared those end-of-the-year speeches they wanted so desperately to get just right.

We also saw our most creative students, especially those who wrote poetry. They wanted to share their work and to find more than the praise or puzzled looks they received from classmates' responses. As we sought real audiences for our students' writing, we encouraged them to enter poetry contests, which also generated considerable interest and enthusiasm in individual conferences.

Our best students, then, recognized a good thing when they saw it: they knew the writing center represented a resource that could be used when needed, so they didn't hesitate to seek our help. It is interesting to observe that often our best students came to the center, not to work on regular classroom assignments, but rather when faced with *real* writing situations that mattered to them.

At the other end of the spectrum, we also saw the "basic" students, those who had to "qualify" for their basic-level classes. They came often to our writing center, though sometimes reluctantly at first. They had to be shown that the center was a nonthreatening source of help, something we tried to accomplish by role-playing conference situations in class. When asked about her experience in the center, one such student said, "You go in there feeling really stupid because you feel incompetent. But it is not like that at all; it's very relaxed . . . don't feel stupid because if you go, you are the smart one."

These students, extremely low in self-esteem and devoid of confidence in their writing, benefited immensely from the one-to-one

instruction at the center. They came with a variety of problems. For example, they often needed more explanation and help getting started on a writing assignment. They also needed help on specific sentence structure problems. Working individually, we were able to discuss the problems, using the students' own writing. Such sessions, we felt, had significance far outweighing class periods where the whole group might correct sentences produced by a teacher or a textbook.

Another consideration, one we didn't foresee, was that these basic-level students needed the special attention they got in the center. We treated them and their writing with respect. And, yes, sometimes these students talked about more than their writing. Occasionally we heard about problems with boyfriends or parents. At such times we reminded ourselves that establishing rapport is at the heart of the conference method. We remembered Lucy Calkins's caution that "our first job . . . is to be a person, not just a teacher. It is to enjoy, to care, and to respond. We cry, laugh, nod, and sigh. We let the writer know she has been heard" (Calkins 1986, 118-19). In describing his experience with our center, one student said, "I think that when you go in for writing assistance you learn more about the teacher and the teacher also learns more about the student. This is really important."

Other students who really needed our help were the middle-of-the-road students, called "college prep" at Madeira. There weren't as many basic sentence errors to be worked on with this group, but we did a lot of work with helping them to focus their ideas. Sometimes they came in with what they called a "draft" of a paper, but which we noticed was really freewriting, that is, a first effort. So we helped them focus by asking what their most interesting or important ideas were, sometimes turning their papers over as we asked those questions, in order to force them to step back from the details they'd written and sort out their thoughts. One student expressed her experience well: "Writing assistance basically acted as a mirror for my own thoughts. I couldn't focus on anything myself, and there were so many possibilities, I couldn't tell what I wanted to write about. But the teacher pokes and prods and asks the right questions so that I can focus on what I wish to write." Another student said, after reading aloud a paper in conference, "It let me hear what needs to be changed and stirred up some more ideas."

There were other groups of students who especially benefited from working in the center. Shy students who normally never voluntarily spoke out in class sometimes found new confidence as they experienced the encouragement offered by the writing center teacher. On the other hand, the class clowns also benefited, for they were freed from their

buddies' expectations to perform and could concentrate on the writing tasks at hand. We realized, too, that one of the benefits of working almost exclusively with the students' writing rather than with textbook materials was that we could easily focus on individual ethnic or cultural language needs as they arose.

We were also pleased when teachers in other content areas stopped in with questions about their own or their students' writing. On rare occasions the principal even wandered in to talk over the wording of a passage written for an important letter or report. Also, if my memory serves me correctly, we answered a grammatical question or two for the superintendent as well. We realized we had become a resource that was truly meant to serve the school community as a whole.

The high school writing center, then, is for all, but especially for those who want it and for those who need it. We who staff such centers are wise to check records periodically to monitor which students are and are not using the center. We then can seek ways to encourage particular types of students so that they all will eventually recognize the benefits of working one-to-one. As one of our students explained, "In a classroom, the teacher is busy helping others, but in Writing Assistance it's your time."

References

- Calkins, L. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986.
- Hairston, M. *A Contemporary Rhetoric*. 3rd ed. Instructor's Manual. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.