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Writing Theory and Practice Final Project

At the conclusion of our first semester as Writing Associates, we both wished that we had received greater practical training at the beginning of the semester, as well as more standardized and applicable resources throughout it. Our dissatisfactions inspired both of us to complete our final project on improving this area of the Writing Center and the course for new Writing Associates. Despite the fact that we came up with this project for different reasons, the goal for our final project was the same.

While going through the process of becoming a new Writing Associate at Trinity, Sarah found herself enjoying most aspects of tutoring. However, she struggled with the task of applying certain ideas she learned in Rhetoric 302 to actual tutoring sessions- particularly the more theoretical concepts. Overall, she feels confident in her tutoring abilities, but thinks there must be better ways of applying what we read in *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* to practical scenarios. According to Sarah, one option that may better prepare new Writing Associates who face similar struggles is the creation of annotated handouts, not only for the tutees, but also for the tutors, on how to teach various writing concepts to their peers during tutoring sessions. The textbook that Trinity Writing Associates used prior to *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, called *The Practical Tutor* (now slightly outdated) by Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith, features helpful chapters that outline practical tutoring techniques, providing examples on how tutors can utilize those techniques in real life situations. Both of us believe that these new handouts should include already existing tools for tutoring that can be included in annotations, similar to those found in *The Practical Tutor*.

Soon into her first semester as a Writing Associate, Caroline recognized the need for more efficient and standardized handouts, as well as new handouts on writing aspects we do not already have available for tutors. This need came from the fact that during many of her tutoring sessions, she was encountering the same types of writing issues. Many of these issues could be easily resolved with the use of an effective handout, and most of them would be difficult to explain without one. Through her conversations with other tutors and observing their tutoring sessions, she learned that the ways in which tutors explained certain concepts and the information that they gave was not always consistent or standardized. This is fine if tutors are confident in their own way of explaining things, but for many tutors, they were not comfortable doing so for many aspects of writing. A common fear for most new writing tutors is being asked a question that they do not know the answer to, or even worse- not knowing how to find the answer. Creating a set of handouts that could cover these difficult to explain topics in a standardized and tutor-friendly fashion would be a great resource for all tutors, new and old. These handouts would also alleviate many of the fears of new tutors, and act as a foundation for their own individualized ways of explaining certain concepts. Both tutors and tutees would have access to these handouts, and professors could even distribute them to students if they notice common errors that need to be addressed in their student's writing. Ideally, tutors would be provided with a binder that contains all of the handouts with annotations about how best to tutor certain concepts. These annotations would be provided by current tutors, and could be continuously added to with advice or tricks that tutors come up with from year to year. With this system, the knowledge that past tutors gain from their experiences can be passed down, and both the handouts and the annotations can be appropriately modified. This will increase the confidence of and resources for tutors, and therefore improve the overall quality of tutoring

sessions. If Writing Associates can better understand how to tutor, they will do a better job tutoring. If tutees have a clearer explanation for how to write, they will do a better job with their writing.

The importance of handouts in writing centers across the country has been acknowledged, but also debated. For example, in the beginning stages of the Purdue University Online Writing Lab's creation, creator Muriel Harris outlines the original need for handouts in an article from the 1994 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*: "A few brief announcements on the Internet resulted in... thousands of requests for handouts—from school districts in British Columbia; government offices... Internet users in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, Mexico, etc." (Harris 17). Although this article might be somewhat outdated, from the standpoint of the modern Internet, Harris nonetheless points out that "thousands" of people showed the desire for handouts- a number that is most likely still applicable today. From a more contemporary perspective, directors of the University of Vermont's writing center, Susan Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch, shared their thoughts on the topic of using instructive handouts in an article from the 2007 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. First, they seem to contradict the use of handouts in the writing center, touching upon the fact that "handouts seem by their nature to be reductive, prescriptive, and rule-driven, to suggest that knowledge is passed on rather than constructed" (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 6). They go on to say that handouts seem to convey the notion that the writing center is a "storehouse" of information, rather than a place that draws success from student collaboration (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 6). This emphasis on collaboration has been emphasized in our own Rhetoric 302 class.

However, Dinitz and Kiedaisch eventually come to the realization that handouts, especially those created by students, are in fact beneficial for both tutors and their peers. The

University of Vermont writing tutors create notebooks filled with handouts that relate to a variety of writing disciplines: “Designing a handout... makes tutors much more aware that writing is socially constructed within their own disciplines” (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 9). Dinitz and Kiedaisch analyze some other positive effects of these notebooks, as they state: “These make it immediately apparent that disciplines are unique communities with their own ways of writing, and that being a good writer in college involves learning those ways of writing” (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 6). They further the discussion by questioning how these handouts collected in notebooks are unique from other resources that students could use for guidance, such as online writing labs or handbooks, to which they respond: “For one thing, the notebooks embody and thus model the nature of disciplinary conventions not as rules but as agreed upon ways of talking, ways that change over time as a community changes” (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 7). Dinitz and Kiedaisch continue to back this positive view by saying that such handouts are “subjective rather than objective- created *by people*, used *by people*- not a set of rules that must be followed, as generic handouts often seem to suggest” (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 8). The fact that these handouts can be so interpersonal in their creation, as well as through their executional use, speaks to their actual focus on student collaboration.

In her thesis submitted to the University of Central Florida College of Arts and Humanities, Megan Lambert shared the findings from her study on the use of writing resources in writing center tutoring sessions. She looked at the patterns and variations in the resources that writing tutors use, the ways they are implemented in tutoring sessions, and the impact this has on the facilitation of the writer’s learning during the consultation. (Lambert iii). More specifically, she explores the role that writing resources play in mediating activity during tutoring sessions.

Lambert found that tutors may begin a session by providing the writer with a resource to show that they are prepared for the session and are familiar with what the tutee wants help with based on their appointment description. They may also retrieve the resource at some point during the tutoring session when a question or concern arises that could be related to a preexisting handout. If the resource does not contain the information the tutor is looking for, they most likely reference a different handout as a supplement to their own knowledge or the handouts they have access to (Lambert 47). Lambert found that the tutor would either place the resource between the tutee and the him or herself to encourage the tutee to use the resource for him or herself, or provide the tutee with guidance about how to find the resource online for him or herself (Lambert 48).

She found that tutors used resources to explain and model how to use familiar resources, to give the tutee an associated or general resource to read, to review the resource and then explain the information they found or have the tutee do so, to draw connections between the resource and the tutee's writing or have the tutee do so, and to both make suggestions and/or revisions as a result of the information they found in a resource (Lambert 49). There were also times where knowledge was created or exchanged between the tutor and tutee without the use of a resource. In these cases, the tutor drew from his or her own prior knowledge and expertise or asked questions to prompt the writer to solve the problem on their own (Lambert 52).

Based on her findings, Lambert demonstrates the potential of writing resources to contribute to the collaborative knowledge that develops during tutoring sessions (Lambert iii). This relates to how tutors use the control over the distribution of knowledge they possess when they decide whether or not implement resources into the tutoring session. Compared to the Storehouse model of a writing center in which the tutor has control of the session, the use of

handouts allows tutors and tutees to share control over the session and obtain knowledge in a collaborative manner (Lambert 52).

In order to incorporate our own, first-hand lore research into our project, we sent out an email containing three basic questions regarding tutoring and handouts. Thirty-two Trinity Writing Associates received this email, and nine of them responded as of December 8, 2015 (about a 28% response rate). The three questions we asked the tutors were: “What is the most common error you come across in your tutoring sessions? What do you spend the most time working on with your tutees?”, “What things do you find most difficult explaining to your tutees?”, and “How often do you use handouts during your sessions? What suggestions would you have in improving the handouts we have/other handouts we could include?”.

Tutors answered the first question by sharing that the most common areas of error or uncertainty they found themselves focusing on during a session included sentence structure/fragments, general grammar rules, discerning passive from active voice, structural organization of an essay, citations, thesis statements, and how to help tutees get their thoughts down on paper more efficiently. Focusing on whole paper organization received the highest number of votes, with sentence structure and grammar coming in second, and passive versus active voice in third.

In response to the second question, writing topics that tutors found most difficult to explain to their tutees include comma rules, topic sentences, grammar to English Second Language (ESL) students, and how to improve a tutee’s clarity of expression or phrasing without completely rewriting their sentences for them. Working on comma rules had the most votes, improving clarity of expression came in second, while grammar to ESL students and topic sentences tied for third place.

Most of the tutors who gave responses said that they only used handouts during their tutoring sessions once or twice, though usually not too often. The handouts they reported using include the handouts on citation rules as well as the Chemistry and Biology lab report writing guides. A few responded that, instead of using physical handouts, they preferred referring their tutees to the online Purdue OWL site, or even the Trinity College Writing Center Resource page online.

A high number of these tutors gave detailed suggestions on how to improve the current handouts and what handouts to introduce to those already existing. Some new handouts that they suggested to create include a passive versus active voice handout, a topic sentence handout, a handout covering multiple citation formats, and handouts for common mistakes that ESL students make, potentially divided into sections to accommodate native Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and other foreign language speakers who may come to the Writing Center. In terms of improving the current handouts, tutors made comments such as, “The more visual the better.” One person also advised avoiding the use of overly technical language in the handouts, as it might intimidate or confuse the tutee at first, or make it more difficult for the tutor to explain.

A larger aspect to consider is how other national and NESCAC school writing centers incorporate handouts within their own websites. For example, Texas A&M University’s writing center website has a dynamic visual layout; their specific web page of handouts is extensive and organized, including an alphabetized list of topics such as “Delivering a Presentation,” “Brainstorming,” “Analyzing Visual Images,” “Analyzing Poetry,” “Plot Development,” and many more. The web pages linked to these subtitles include visual diagrams, as well as links to other helpful websites or articles and even YouTube videos that help explain a specific writing-

related topic. Another interesting aspect of the Texas A&M website is the fact that they have handouts written in different languages, most likely for the use of ESL students. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's writing center website is also well organized and visually appealing. One unique aspect of their web page on handouts is the presence of carefully constructed videos made by Chapel Hill students and faculty that outline specific ways their institution promotes learning writing-related techniques and concepts. In terms of other NESCAC schools, Hamilton College's handout web page features a limited amount of resources, and usually they only provide written guidelines without including other mediums of presentation to engage students in the way Texas A&M and Chapel Hill do. These deficiencies could be related to the small size of the school (like Trinity and many other NESCACs) and possibly lack of funding. Other schools like Tufts University, Bowdoin College, and Wesleyan University either do not include handouts on their website at all, or simply have students refer to other online resources instead of actual handouts. By updating the presentation of handouts and other writing related resources on our center website to the standards of other writing centers across the country, tutors could feel confident referring tutees to our website and be able to benefit from it during their sessions.

Currently at Trinity, there are handouts available to Writing Associates, but these handouts come from various other writing centers and do not all follow the same format. These handouts were not created with Trinity students specifically in mind, or Trinity Writing Associates. The handouts that already exist in hard copy in the Writing Center and its satellite locations cover writing lab reports, subject-verb agreement, counterarguments, pronouns (pronoun-antecedent agreement), active versus passive voice, thesis statements, commas, APA documentation, citing source material, and a list of helpful writing related web sites. Online,

under the Writing Center website Resources and Links tab, the resources are organized into sections titled Writing as a Process, Citations, Citing Source Material, Citation Generators, Genres, Grammar, Scientific Writing, Writing for Psychology, Writing for Chemistry, Writing for Employment, Poster Presentations, Medical Writing, Online Videos on Writing and Grammar, and Writing Across the Curriculum. Not all of the handouts that we have available as hard copies are available on the website, and most of the resources listed on the website are not available in hard copy. This is another reason why a binder for Writing Associates containing all of the resources would be a great improvement to the current system.

Based on our personal experiences, our research, and the comparison of what Trinity offers compared to other colleges and universities, we have several suggestions to make about what we hope to see and what we hope will be continued. As Writing Associates, we see our job as not only to strengthen the writing of students, but to strengthen the tutoring that Trinity College Writing Associates can offer. For this reason, we hope that our project will serve as a strong platform for others to build upon in the future. This project is an Evergreen project, meaning that it will never die. We hope that our handouts will be completed using the same format that we began with, and maybe even expanded upon. This could include other forms of presentations besides handouts such as Prezis, videos, or voice-over annotations in order to increase the number of ways that the information is transmitted and accessible through.

Additionally, a section requiring Writing Associates to note which handouts they referenced during their session could be incorporated into the client report form, allowing for information to be more easily gathered about this topic at Trinity. The resources that are not included in a binder for Writing Associates or in the organizers in the writing center could be available on our website. We have already created handouts on common writing errors, commas

usage, and citations. Some suggestions for handouts that we hope could be added would be on techniques for making outlines, including reverse outlining, and the best situations to use each type of outline, how to explain articles, what makes a good thesis, topic sentences, transitions, introduction, and conclusion, and what makes a good essay, research paper, lab report, resume, and application letter. The new handouts should follow the same formatting, be visually appealing, include examples, and be explained with an audience of tutors and tutees in mind, and the old handouts should be reformatted to follow these guidelines. These handouts are effective because they are made by tutors and writers, for tutors and writers. Because of this, the handouts can all look the same, be more practical rather than theoretical, and be relevant to the writing issues we see at Trinity.

Works Cited

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