

Starting a Writing Center in a Private University

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Abstract: *Writing centers have long been identified as a supplementary component in process based writing skill development. While writing centers are a common constituent at higher education institutes in the developed world, these facilities are rarely available within the developing academic contexts. This paper revolves around the introduction of writing center facilities at a graduate business school in Pakistan. The study is framed as action research with phases of implementation followed by a feedback mechanism leading to the next phase. Feedback was collected with the help of observation and semi structured interviews conducted with instructors, tutors, as well as writing center participants. Feedback from the first two cycles of implementation highlight that teachers as well as students perceived some improvement in terms of the student writing outcomes, as well as their overall understanding of the writing process. The feedback also indicated the need for an improved structure, organization and timing of the center. It also highlighted the need for marketing the writing center, environmental modification and rethinking the tutor recruitment and training.*

Keywords: Writing center, student writing support, EFL writing, L2

Introduction

Language proficiency often plays a critical role in determining student's academic performance (Vinke & Jochems, 1993). Students need to be able to effectively communicate verbally and, more importantly, in writing when undergoing tertiary education. Higher education institutes expect students to be able to communicate their ideas well in the language of instruction, which in case of many countries is often English (Dearden, 2014), despite their first language being otherwise. Although students are required to enroll in language and composition courses in the first years of their undergraduate studies it is not uncommon for students, particularly second language (L2) students to require further support in terms of writing skills (Williams & Severino, 2004). The current study is built on this premise and aims to explore various ways in which providing writing support services at a higher education institute can be helpful to students who struggle with their English language writing and expression.

Writing Centers: Theoretical Background

Writing centers, often called with other names such as “lab”, “clinic”, “place”, “studio” (Trimbur, 2000), have been around since 1930s (Thonus, 2003; Williams & Severino, 2004).

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Writing centers are often established organically (Harris, 1990; Kolba & Crowell, 1996; Jordan, 2006) in educational institutions as an academic support system to help students “talk about writing” (Leahy, 1990). The center’s function and structure while revolving around writing can be as diverse and complex as the process of writing itself (Marcus, 1984; Leahy, 1990; Walker, 2000).

Writing support services and writing centers have been seen in tertiary education institutes outside the North American context since the 1990s (Tan, 2011). Reichelt et al. (2013) provide a list of writing center endeavors in national contexts where English is not the first language as part of their analysis of similarities between these writing centers. They observe that many of these writing centers operate in a context where the role of writing center as well as the awareness of such support function is nonexistent making it both difficult to explain but also exciting as to what a writing center can and will do. The culture also determines the way a writing center would find its place as well as evolve over time within that context. For example both Armstrong (2012) and (Dan, 2012) observe that students in India and China respectively are more exam focused and are taught in systems where writing signifies as an exam. Many students in Asian contexts learn to memorize or rote learn to pass composition and language courses the way they do with other courses with facts and figures (Ronesi, 2012) thus, the focus of writing and composition courses is on the product and not the process (McKinley, 2011). Similar approaches to teaching can be observed in Pakistan (Behlol & Anwar, 2011; Inamullah & Hussain, 2011; Safdar, 2013) with the teacher centered classroom environment, the presence of rote memorization and grammar translation methods of learning foreign language/s.

Against this backdrop the role and function of a writing center may not only be different from the native English speaking contexts but its needs may also determine it to be somewhat contradictory to what Thompson et al. (2009) call the lore of writing center with its non-directive and student controlled environment. .

Background of the Current Study

As developed in the above section English language proficiency is a complex phenomenon in Pakistan. Pakistan is a country of many local and regional languages which according to Tamim (2014) exceed 25. Urdu is the national language (Manan & David, 2014) despite it being the mother tongue of less than 8% of the total population (Tamim, 2014). English on the other hand has had a complicated history within the realm of national policy in Pakistan. At the time of independence Urdu was made the national language of the country, while the English language was to be the official language until Urdu could take over (Tamim, 2014). Coleman (2010) charts the national language education policy from the time of independence till 2009, demonstrating how based on the political regime in power English assumed a different role in education in Pakistan. Coleman also notes that despite national policy variations, English is considered to be the language of prestige and depending upon the school system is taught differently.

The educational system in Pakistan comprises various players including public or government schools, high-end elite private English medium schools, Madrasas/religious schools and a plethora of mid-range private schools catering to the middle and lower income groups

(Andrabi, Das, & Khwaja, 2008). A majority of these private schools claim that their medium of instruction is English, which is often considered to be synonymous with high quality education (Shamim, 2011). This is however not realistic, since with sheer volume comes the possibility of variability in quality of education as well as the extent to which English language proficiency is obtained by the student body (Aslam, 2009).

When students enter higher educational institutions in Pakistan they are exposed to an environment where they are predominantly taught and always assessed in English language. In this context the disparity between how English is taught at the secondary school that they attended becomes an important determinant of their academic success. Shamim (2008) highlights that students coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds consistently demonstrate superior English proficiency in comparison to students coming from middle or lower economic backgrounds within the same tertiary educational context indicating the divide between how language is taught across the range of private schools catering to pupils from different income groups.

Considering the above, it may be submitted that an average student enrolled for a graduate level study program at a University in Pakistan may vary in terms of his/her ability to communicate in English despite the emphasis of the institute on English being the medium of instruction (Zafar, 2009). Zafar (2009) further adds that since most Universities offer generic English language courses in the beginning of the coursework, these courses may not adequately prepare students to write in specific academic and professional contexts such as academic research work. In this case, language proficiency developed during secondary schooling may drive their higher educational experiences from being one of empowerment and choice to feeling inadequate, marginalized and frustrated (Tamim, 2013).

On the other hand, students come from diverse secondary educational background and many of them struggle with their language expression particularly within the context of English for academic purposes. To bridge the divide between the institutional expectations and student performance writing support services or a writing center was proposed.

The Writing Center

The writing center was organic in nature and had risen out of the institution's own need to help students write a comprehensible piece following all academic conventions, particularly in cases of a graduate thesis.

The author mentored the writing center which was staffed by undergraduate students who were in their final or second last semester of study. They were called peer-tutors and were hired as part-time student interns for the center. The tutors underwent a 3 dimensional selection process before they were assigned students including their academic performance, particularly their performance in language courses, an interview with the writing center mentor and a written essay to examine their own language capabilities. The tutors were provided basic training as well as support material to refer to in order to assist the students. It was reinforced that the role of the tutor was to provide peer support and review the student's work and not to do their work for them.

A universal scheduling calendar was created which communicated to students through teachers who take research focused and other writing courses. The students were required

to sign-up with the center online based on the available schedules of the tutors. The students were initially given a 20 minute time slot, however after a one week review the time seemed impractical and was extended to 40 minute appointment slots. The research students were required to make at least one visit in person to the peer-tutor to get a review on their work in terms of its presentation and comprehensibility with respect to language before their final submission for the viva voce, an oral examination where the students where to present and defend their research work in front of a panel of faculty members.

Action Research

The writing center project was a pilot study and an assessment mechanism was put in place to examine its impact and contribution to student development. The project was taken as action research where each pilot phase was to be reflected upon to incorporate improvement in the next cycle. Following the Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect cycle ([Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000](#)) the first phase of the pilot study employed 2 peer-tutor interns who were to work 20 hours per week looking through the work of graduate students. The data were collected primarily from observation and participant interviews including interviews of students and peer-tutors as well as the teachers whose students visited the writing center in order to create optimum opportunities for triangulation ([Creswell, 2002](#)).

Phase 1

Phase 1 documented the first semester of writing centers initiation. A proposal was submitted to the related authorities to start the writing center and after encouragement and approvals from the administration the recruitment process was started. The planning in this phase included proposal creation and submission, devising a recruitment plan as well as feedback mechanism with the help of which data for the next phase of planning would be collected and worked upon.

Two peer-tutors were recruited to provide support services in the writing center, however only one continued. The peer provided support 20 hours a week, maintained a log of all students who were provided support for the six week internship time period. At the end of the six week internship an in-depth interview was conducted with the peer for the purpose of data collection.

Phase 2

Phase 2 began in the middle of the next semester. Four interns were recruited each of whom were to dedicate 20 hours a week to the writing center. Some of the administrative gaps identified through observations as well as peer interview from Phase 1 were implemented in the second phase including the number of tutors, workability of the calendar, space and availability of computers, and additional to tutor training. After the end of this phase the circle of interviews was extended to include 2 teachers and 4 students along with three of the four tutors that remained with the writing center until the end of the internship.

Data Collection

Data was collected primarily through two mediums: mentor observations and in-depth interviews with the parties involved. The observations were recorded as field notes and mostly comprised the general hiccups in the process of the writing center implementation, casual conversations with the writing center interns as well as students who requested support as well as a journal entry after the author was requested to intervene in a difficult situation during consultation.

The second and a more formalized medium of data collection was a series of in-depth semi structured interviews conducted with peer-tutors, teachers and students. While the first phase only recorded the voice of the peer-tutor, the second phase incorporated feedback from representatives of all groups involved in the writing center endeavor ensure with triangulated findings. All peer-tutors were interviewed, three graduate students who were required to get their thesis reviewed before final submission and one undergraduate research project student was selected as student representatives. Three teachers were identified for the final phase of the interview based on the number of students who signed up for the writing center from their classes. Two of the teachers were interviewed because of time and availability restraints. The following table illustrates key areas around which the interview revolved for each type of participant.

Table 1

Peer-Tutor Interviews	Student Interview	Teacher Interview
What value they see the writing center may add	Improvement (both in outcome as well as themselves as writers)	Improvement (both outcome and students as writers)
Challenges they faced as peers	Feeling/emotions with regards to process of consultation	What value they see the writing center may add (institutions and students)
Roles they saw themselves playing as peers	What value they see the writing center may add	Teacher's perception of the peer's role
Self-learning as a writing center peer	Concerns/frustrations?	Feedback on WC processes and practices (how would you do it differently) Concerns

Note taking was used to record interviews due to some students being uncomfortable about being audio taped. In order to maintain uniformity, the case where interviews were recorded, the audio was not transcribed and was only used to complete the notes. All participants were informed of the research intent and a verbal consent to participate was taken. A detailed summary of interview notes was also emailed to the participants for review and confirmation.

Recurrent Themes

The following section presents an overview of key themes that emerged from the conversations that the researcher had with peer-tutors, students and teachers. Some of these themes were explored in the interview conducted with the peer tutor in Phase 1 and were brought back into the conversation in Phase 2. The section is divided in headings ordered

according to the frequency of the theme's emergence in interviews across all respondents. Where necessary a commentary is included of what interventions were made in phase 1 and how further feedback was collected within the particular theme being talked about.

Writing Center Adds Value

A consensus was found around the opinion that having the writing support service adds value to the experiences and learning of students. While peers, students and teachers all saw different kinds of values that they were able to derive from the center they were nevertheless all in agreement about it being a good addition to the University.

Students felt that one-to-one support provided customized feedback and also made them feel cared for. They appreciated someone looking at their work and checking it before the actual submission. Two out of the four students felt that their thesis looked better after they had incorporated the feedback provided by the tutor. Two felt that the reviewers only proofread their work which they could have done on their own. All four students felt that the review did not really make any improvement in them as a writer.

The peers reported that the majority of students they tutored appreciated the feedback and were glad that someone was reviewing their work before submission.

The teachers expressed that the writing center has impacted the comprehension and presentability of some of the theses in a positive manner. More importantly, they felt that making a writing center review mandatory for students made them take writing seriously. "Now that the students know that their submission may be delayed because of language they are paying more attention to what and how they write", one of the teachers commented.

The "Checking" Paradigm

It was interesting to note that upon inquiry about the role of the peer-tutor the first thing that came up across all three categories of respondents was to "check" the work of the students. The students perceived the tutors to be there to look at their work and identify mistakes. A similar response resonated across all peers who felt that their key role was to look at the student's work for language inconsistencies and highlight them so that the students can correct them. Teachers also felt that the tutors were designated to look at student's work to identify problem areas and guide them to rewrite them in a more academically sound manner.

Two things stem from this observation first is the focus on output and second the remedial expectations of the writing center. They confirm the cultural expectations established by [McKinley \(2011\)](#); [Ronesi \(2012\)](#) but at the same time indicate to the researcher that actions might be taken to help expand the scope of the expectations of the center.

Time and Timing

Since the writing center services were offered throughout the semester, when thesis students were requested to get their writing reviewed they felt rushed having to go through another

procedure before their final submission. They also felt that the advantage of having someone to review their work was somewhat compromised because of the rush they were in, "I could have gained more if the writing support was available during the thesis proposal time", one of the students said. A similar opinion resonated across the peer-tutors who felt that reviewing a complete thesis all at once, which was what majority of the attendees brought with them, was a daunting task.

All students, peers and teachers acknowledged the need to meet multiple times and for longer periods in order to critically review the writing for improvement.

Writing Center Needs Marketing

Interviews with students revealed that only a few were aware of the center until the very end of their thesis work and that, too, because it was made mandatory by the administration to get their thesis reviewed. This led to heavy traffic during the submission period which could have been avoided through adequate awareness and marketing.

How can I learn from them? They are Undergraduates

An interesting and unforeseen frustration that peer-tutors and students felt was the discomfort graduate thesis students felt receiving a language review from undergraduate students. Undergraduate students were offered the internship as peer tutors due to their language proficiency as well as higher contact hours they had to spend at the University. This however led graduate students to feel awkward which they openly communicated in the interview as they first felt demeaned by the fact that a junior student would check their work.

Other Changes in the Center Structure

As per the peer tutors as well as the students, the writing center needed to employ more peer tutors especially during the time of thesis submission. Moreover better IT support was requested by the peer tutors who were often forced to work in student labs due to their designated room having no computers. While student scheduling worked well during the light traffic, the walk-in students increased during the thesis submission time creating a backlog.

Writing Center Also Added to Student Stress

A mentor's journal entry recorded a particular incident of a student's emotional meltdown upon receiving extensive feedback on the thesis. The student after receiving writing related feedback felt incapable of doing anything to the piece of writing at hand and felt extremely stressed. While the incident was one of a kind in terms of its emotional intensity, the peers and students, during interview, also talked about how some students were annoyed, at least initially, with having to go through a writing review process. The frustration according to students was more from the timings of the center. Moreover, the peers commented that many students voiced concerns about the writing review being mandatory.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation of the feedback received by all stakeholders of the writing center, the following areas will need to be reexamined to implement the subsequent third phase.

- Considering the time as well as the power distance factor explored in the above section it seems important to rethink human resource arrangement of the current center.
- The center must offer services from the beginning of the semester in order to provide students more opportunities to receive a review of their work.
- The writing center must also incorporate a marketing strategy with the help of which students who are the target customers of the center are more informed about its services.
- The center must also renegotiate the administrative support in order to create better center functionality.
- The center should also work further in making students, particularly thesis students, feel supported rather than strained.

Moving further from the Checking Paradigm

Finally, and on a longer term basis, a strategy needs to be devised in order to help the writing center and its expectations evolve from a mere remedial service provider to a holistic student support service which helps students become better writers. The strategy while being sensitive and responding to the needs of the local context will have to help the stakeholders see the possibility of a writing center enabling students to engage in process based writing, thus helping them become more learning oriented than outcome oriented.

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