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Writing Center Attendance Perception a Positive for Students

Even though a writing or tutoring center (or now popularly called a learning center) may have held a negative connotation for a student in the past, high schools and post-secondary institutions are changing this perception in positive ways. Students attending writing or learning center tutoring sessions have no reason to feel a negative stigma when a supportive, collaborative environment is created within the institution.

About the Observation and Initial Findings

This paper will present findings at the Jackson High School (JHS) Writing and Learning Center where the peer tutors and its director, Mrs. Kim Germano, build on the literacy skills of an average of 70 students per day ^{Not really necessary to cite} (Germano) in all subject areas including composition. The duration of the ethnographic observation was over two days at 45-minutes per day during period five in October, 2012. My role at the school is Dual Enrollment English teacher with this being my inaugural year as a district employee, though I've been a teacher of English and journalism for over 13 years. My classroom is in the same four-room pod as the writing center which was intentionally designed this way for dual enrollment student's ease of use. I consider myself a member of the subculture to the extent I have referred students to the writing or learning center for individual writing consultations as a partner with the director. Also, I have accessed the center seeking enrichment materials for my use as a teacher with students. I do collaborate about

Very
straight
forward
thesis

student progress with the center director. However, I do not physically spend much time in the JHS learning center as I consider it a student-centered space. It does house the printer I use, so I am in and out maybe five to six times per day on average.

The Role of Physical Space as Student Support

During my brief visits, I have always admired the physical layout of the student-centered space and observed that students seem to have a sense of freedom to work or collaborate supported by the room's content and structure. It is a space for work where I observe students appear to want to be. For example, at approximately 20' x 30' the room is large enough to accommodate 30 students per period along with the seven 4-foot wide round, wood grain-topped tables each with four hard resin-backed student chairs with steel legs where students can sit comfortably alone or in small groups. The room is warm and carpeted with a low-pile carpet colored with flecked grays, blues and purples. There is a dark purple block wall to the north by the door to match the school's spirit colors of purple, white and gold. On the south side is a counter holding six individual PCs and flat screen monitors with a student chair in front of each, and these seem to be heavily utilized by students during the day. The laser printer is at the teacher's work area on the north side of the room accessible to students. A three-section white board is affixed to the west wall, and messages are written to students about NHS meetings and writing contests. Students can even write messages or academic questions on the board to each other with teacher permission. On the east wall there is a large three-column bookshelf filled with enrichment materials such as school-appropriate VHS tapes, novels and textbooks. Next to the shelf is a cart of hardback Webster's dictionaries and thesauruses. Near the teacher's work station is the small bookshelf that holds the sign in sheet notebook and stacks of blank ACT practice booklets. After conducting this observation of the center, it's obvious that the room

Seems
designed
for
comfort

effectively provides students with both materials and work space that seems to be a necessary part of a collaborative literacy space for students. *yes*

This physical layout of the student-centered space - complete with resources - has played an integral role in the evolution of success the JHS writing and learning center has achieved.

Additionally, Germano takes personal responsibility for creating perceptions since she is the only adult in the room. *she states:* "I try to make sure my language is positive when the kid walks in the door.

How they're greeted is making them important. Sure from time to time, I've been in there and something may get said by a newly-assigned student who claims to not know why he's here, but it's never outright negative. It's all about meeting their (student) needs" (Germano).

In support of the JHS writing/learning center I find that literacy researcher, Andrea

Lunsford, cites two models of writing center methodologies. First, Lunsford describes one writing center model in her article "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" as a "storehouse" which "operates as information stations or storehouses, prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners" (110). The JHS writing/learning center does offer space and materials for student use and skill building. However, Lunsford goes on to describe a more pedagogically-sound writing center as a "collaborative" space where the center facilitator sees "knowledge as interior, as inside the student, and the writing center's job as helping students get in touch with this knowledge, as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers" (110). These models Lunsford has researched both fit the JHS writing and learning center simultaneously since it is individual or small-group focused based on student need with one-on-one conferences available that provide the important component Lunsford cites as "collaboration". For example, the JHS writing and learning center adds value by offering

good job contextualizing with scholarship
Contextualizing
grounding my idea in research claims + evidence

✓ ACT or SAT standardized test preparation modules while also offering peer collaborative tutoring or consultant (adult-student) writing collaboration (Germano).

The Role of Supportive Environment to Enhance Collaboration

Good heading

Germano's intentional creation of a supportive environment correlates to composition researcher, Janet Bean's, findings in her 1998 article, *Feminine Discourse in the University: The Writing Center Conference As a Site of Linguistic Resistance* relating to discourse opportunities. In her study, Bean states that an implied importance by the institution on "providing college students with opportunities to participate in supportive, nonhierarchical discussions about their academic work" (129) is invaluable. Primarily, Bean asserts that the use of a "nonhierarchical discussion" leads to an "egalitarian relationship between student and consultant" (129). Therefore, when a peer tutor and a student are discoursing about composition, for example, in a learning or writing center like the one at Jackson High School, the student being tutored has a positive experience since the tutor or writing center director hold no real power over the student. Subsequently, this makes for honest and open discourse which allows for the environment to be perceived as supportive by all involved.

Through brief interviews of students age 18 and over and the director, I gathered overwhelming data representing positive perceptions of student attendance, whether assigned by a guidance counselor or teacher or chosen by voluntary need. (Note that student names that follow have been changed to reflect IRB student confidentiality requirements.) The key to student perception and attendance, according to Germano, who has seen the JHS learning center evolve under her seven-year tenure, is creating a positive supportive space with appropriate resources where students feel welcome. Germano defines a supportive space as one that is

collaborative and “engineered for learning and discussion between the peer tutors or between individual students and me.”

Students' Positive Perceptions

Students in the JHS writing / learning center perceive a supportive environment and see no negative stigma attached with spending time in the room. Those I interviewed during the observation were all asked the same question: *What negative or positive stigma does coming to the JHS writing / learning center have for you?* I only could record the responses of the students and tutors who were of at 18 and over, and those four students, three males and one female, each offered nearly the same positive spin.

18-year-old Caucasian male, Caleb P. says coming to the writing and learning center “helps me figure out what I’m doing. She [peer tutor] is tutoring me in math during this. I come during school because there is no time outside of school. I get help on college essays as well. There’s no negative stigma. I chose to be here.”

18-year-old Caucasian female, Allison M., said, “I get help. It’s positive. I feel like I leave here and actually learn something. There are no negatives, except we can’t have our cell phones. I was not doing well in English – your class [referring to me] – and AP Biology so I went to my counselor and reached for help and got a helping hand and now I’m here. I come twice a week or every day instead of study hall.”

Additionally, 18-year-old Caucasian male, Anthony H., said “I don’t have a study hall so I come during lunch to work on ACT prep with Mrs. Germano. I’m trying to raise my scores from a 23 to a 24 or 25. There’s no negative stigma attached to coming here.”

Good
data
presentation
is a
bit
choppy.

Finally, 18-year-old Caucasian male, George B., said he works on ACT prep and that the drills and advice help him a lot. George indicated he feels no negative stigma attached to coming to the writing or learning center.

After discussing each student in brief with Germano, she indicated that three students are referrals; Allison, Caleb and George are assigned to attend. Anthony comes voluntarily. During observation, I noted that Allison worked on research for her English essay one day and then she worked collaboratively with a female peer tutor in her class on biology; Caleb worked with a female peer tutor on his math during one session. The other male students, Anthony and George worked individually and then with Germano on ACT test preparation both days. It is a testimony to both the structure and supportive environment of the JHS writing/learning center that students interviewed – both assigned and attending voluntarily – have the same positive feeling about participating in the center while not feeling stigmatized.

good
point

It is safe to say that each of the four students were able to take advantage of the supportive environment offered by the physical arrangement of the room as it met their needs for literacy collaboration or self-study. Allison was able to work at a computer, research and type her findings independently with the option of stopping to ask a question of any other student near her. Caleb was able to sit with his tutor at round table where three girls also sat. He focused on talking to his tutor and she with him; the other girls were not involved in the session. Anthony and George worked at tables in a solitary manner where they were focused on their individual study. Then, when they were ready to discuss answers, they had access to Germano and could sit next to her at her desk. The supportive environment in the room does seem to enhance the positive attitude into the physical arrangement of space where students feel they have some

autonomy.

This seems key - the space is not only collaborative but student control their activities here (which is strong contrast to classroom).

Even though Bean's study focused predominantly on feminine discourse and not as much on physical space, her assertions about a safe and student-friendly environment hold true for the JHS writing and learning center. Bean states her research found that "writing center scholars stress the importance of creating a non-threatening environment, attending to the student's emotional needs, establishing trust, caring about the student and her work, and being a good listener" (130). Even though neither Bean nor the scholars address specifics when it comes to physical non-threatening environments, it is implied that a space conducive to student work and discourse with tutors must be comfortable for all involved in the composition or learning processes. Bean adds, "A receptive atmosphere supports student learning; if a student is intimidated, she will not talk; if she doesn't talk, she loses a powerful learning opportunity" (130). While Bean is focusing on gender in her study, the learning opportunity she mentions is critical for any student to dialogue about his or her writing or on any subject area is invaluable. This discourse enables the student to participate actively in the process of self-discovery which is, from my perspective as a composition instructor, so vital to the craft.

Germano indicates there was not always a positive perception among students or staff at JHS before she was hired to direct what was then called the writing center. She admits the perception was that it was a place for "special ed." Additionally, she indicates many students did not even know it was there. The re-invention of the JHS writing center in 2006-07 coincided with the addition of the dual enrollment English courses due to the mandate that a writing center be provided by the institution. Instead of students being sent to Stark State College (SSC), the district elected to keep the students enrolled in DE English on campus and provide a writing center in house (Germano). "Initially," Germano said, "when I would only have one or two students come each hour, or when I would have none show up, I would go get some of the cool

I really like this paragraph

kids who were usually seniors in study hall to just come in and hang on in the room to give the perception of it being a cool place to be.” Then, Germano said she made sure to present a customized message to each and every JHS English class about what the writing center could do for those particular students. For example, seniors could get personalized help with college application essays. Basically, Germano said she was given carte blanche from administration to re-create the space as she found effective to reach out to students.

Considering Marginalization

The idea Bean mentions of the writing center “occupying a marginalized position within the institution” (127) does not seem to hold true at JHS according to Germano as student participation in its offerings has increased to nearly 80 visits per day in 2011-12 with full administrative support. This increase was, of course, seen and nurtured over time, while Germano put the ‘cool kids’ to work as tutors when students did begin to trickle in and were asking for help in a subject area in which Germano was not well versed. The word spread about how help with any subject and writing was available each year, and Germano added ACT/SAT preparation coursework in 2010 to help make the center a “dynamic” place. Obviously, offering tutoring in any subject area and offering standardized test help adds to the supportive environment because it is simply meeting the students where they’re at and providing for what they truly need.

Even though Germano is trying to transition away from the label, writing center, to learning center, one main function Germano serves is writing consultant for students in the DE English. Germano who has state certification in teaching English and Social Studies (7-12) and is Wilson reading certified, regularly meets one-on-one with student writers from Kent State

University/Stark, SSC and JHS (dual enrollment). Germano said "I felt like it [calling it the writing center] was not descriptive enough and that when a kid is coming here for Spanish that it [writing center] doesn't fit. Again it is about reaching kids who are walking by and read Writing Center, they might think, oh, that's not what I need." In an effort to keep serving students and ensuring the mission of tutoring and resources being available to all, the evolution of the name to learning center seems valid for this site.

Conclusions

All-in-all, the writing or learning center at JHS exhibits an enabling culture of positive discourse where students are not stigmatized to attend. Even though peer tutors have no real formal training except for Germano's personal modeling, the students still exhibit egalitarian behaviors and were observed to be good listeners during the study. Additionally, it was found that students coming for help exhibited a positive body language of intention and confidence when entering the room. Students quickly signed in, initiated asking any question they may have of a peer or the instructor, and moved toward the work space most suited to meet their goals for the time. (Note that I did not observe any newly-assigned students or first time visitors to the room.) Worthwhile to note is that it is a requirement that each student sign in on the log near the door. Upon investigation of the log, each student did sign in – legibly. After the specific investigation and observation of body language, and through the observations of conversations, tutoring and studying, it is clear that the JHS writing and learning center seems to fulfill Bean's assertion that "an environment conducive to conversation" (131) can be established by incorporating peer tutors, an adult facilitator and tutees into a welcoming environment for positive outcomes.

strong
conclusion

Works Cited

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Nicely done, Jennifer. You do an especially good job contextualizing your observations with other scholarship. Also, I can see you really focused in on how the physical environment facilitates collaboration. You pull together a strong, focused essay... and it's not too long :)

A

OBSERVATION 1

11:13 10-22-12 JHS Writing Center Koladin 2012

Students are making personal connections about killing chickens because some are working on a project after reading Eating Animals.

A student is on her phone. Two other are sitting with her at a round table.

Three students are at three computers of the six along the fall wall.

A male student at the computer is talking about a rabbit dying.

Another male student joins the computer users.

There is random talking about assignments, passwords.

An instructor assigned to the room – female – directs four female students toward an available college math tutor who came in today to work with students.

All students had to sign in to be present in the room during the period.

There are 12 students in the room three are boys.

The phone is ringing. The adult answers.

The noise level is amazingly loud for the space, but the talk is mostly on task.

A boy is admitting that he is typing his research paper that is due today. There are three more class period left for the day. He is asking for a girl to come sit by him. She does not comply.

No one is speaking with the tutor who is in today.

Two girls leave at 11:20.

A boy came in to print a paper out.

The atmosphere seems positive.

Students are smiling.

No one appears to be tutoring anyone else. Students seem to be working independently.

Female students are discussing Biology and a project.

There are seven round tables in the room each with four chairs.

The college-age tutor is not circulating among the students. She's sitting at a table by herself.

A student is talking about an essay that involved her watching a Twilight episode.

The teacher returns to the female students at the table who are supposed to be working on math asking them to be productive.

A student asks if she is supposed to go to study hall or come straight to the room. The teacher tells her that she is on her list and to come straight here.

There is a bookshelf full of movies and books – fiction and non-fiction.

The teacher reminds the ladies that they are not chatting about school. They say they are. They are discussing stress balls that you squeeze. One additional student joins the room to work on standardized test preparation.

At 11:24 the room is more quiet and students are whispering to some degree.

Students are discussing a test that has moved to a new day in government. They are also talking about labs in another class.

A student tutor volunteers to go get a boy who is supposed to be in the learning center from the cafeteria eating area.

Sample papers are blown up on the wall to show proper heading and spacing from MLA. These are above the computer row against the wall.

11:28 A female student approaches the college-volunteer tutor for help to ask a question about math. The student is directing the session with her questions.

Students working at the computers work for a few minutes and then talk again for a few minutes.

A boy is talking about his stock trading to the girl next to him. He is showing her the stock page and explaining his losses. This appears to be a class assignment. He says he is now \$3,000 in debt, but he did offer that before he had been earning about \$700 per day. The girl asks a few unrelated one-word questions, like really?

The two female students working on the math problems are using pink TI calculators – graphing calculators.

The writing / learning center teacher has a student sitting next to her at her desk working one-on-one. She stops working with the student to meet with the boy who just arrived with the peer tutor for math work.

The student working on test preparation checks her answers in the back of the booklet as she goes along. Asian Female.

The boy is continuing to talk about the stock trading project to the girl next to him.

The girl at the computers asks the boy working on his research paper how many pages he has. She gives him encouraging words to keep going. She then explains how to log in to the computer system.

It is a spirit day at the school. Many students are wearing red white and blue today to show spirit.

One of the females working at the table together reads aloud to the other something she is reading and then answering. They are tutoring each other now giving advice and examples. One is giving advice to the other about the paragraph. The one who wrote and read says to the other one that examples are hard to come up with, and don't worry about it.

The college-age tutor gets up from her single student and goes to the table with four girls asking who needs help. She begins working with one students.

The room has posters in it about eBooks. There is a poster of the world on the wall next to a poster about ACT College Readiness Standards.

A boy gets up to pick up a printout from the computer.

A tutor volunteers to work with a boy. He initiates the conversation that he has a test tomorrow and needs help studying. The tutor asks him what he's studying right now. She gets up from her table and goes to him. He is initiating what he knows about his math problem. Then she the peer tutor explains what her method would be.

Another boy arrives to work independently. WM

11:41 There are 14 students in the room. One adult teacher and one college-tutor volunteer.

I am not hearing any complaints from any students about coming into the learning center.

The one boy who the student went to get apologizes for not remembering to come on his own because he had signed up for attending.

An English teacher brings a stack of newspapers – The Canton Repository in to leave on the table for anyone to take. She leaves.

The tutoring session with the female tutor and the boy says he's fine with the concept that he needs to know, so he is asking to go back. He is told that normally he would stay, but today he can leave. He asks what time his is normally supposed to come on Wednesdays. The teacher answers his questions.

Even though there are two students in the room who are my students they do not acknowledge me. They are engaged in their groups.

The math group of girls – one of them shows a photo on her phone to the others of dogs in a car. She is relating why they have dogs in their car.

The boy who is typing his paper due today is leaning back and saying he does not know what to do next since his paper is short on content. Two female students advise him to go home 8th period and finish his paper and then submit it to turn it in.com. They are giving him advice to game the system.

The teacher calls out one student, "Hey Melissa". She is talking too much to the boy struggling with his paper length. The teacher says to her "Always finding a boy."

The teacher then goes to the Asian Female to help with the test preparation.

There are three white males in the center

There are eight white female students.

There is one Eastern Indian female student.

11:51 I am being asked a question by my student, Hey, Ms Koladin, do you know where the Neiman Ranch is? I answer her question and she is on their website. They have affiliates.

The other student who is mine laughs and turns around because she didn't even realize I was in the room.

I observe at least three students with their smart phones out by their working areas.

The teacher in the room sits at a round table to work with the one WM student working alone.

The teacher then gives handouts to the Asian female and to the male student working independently. Both students thank the instructor. The AF student asks if she can write on the hand out.

The printer is running and the teacher asks "Who is printing a book?"

Abbey raises her hand – that's me. The teacher wants her to print two pages to a page and the student apologizes and asks the teacher to show her how to do that. The boy next to her shows her even though the teacher comes over to help.

The teacher is back at her desk working one-on-one with a student about writing an essay.

There are some materials to use like scrap paper, a 3-hole punch, free 3-ring-binders, paper, some free novels and staplers.

There are text books available for student use, but they can't take them out of the room.

There are 12 college dictionaries and about 15 thesauruses on a cart for student use.

Students stand up with one minute left – except two who keep working at the computers.

They are chatting with each other and moving toward the door. They leave when the bell rings.

There are classroom policies on the wall.

There are five tutors in the period, but not many other students needed help today, so they worked on their own work, according to the instructor.

END: 12:00 noon Total Time 42 Minutes