

The MU Writing Lab: What is it, and what is it good for?

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What is a Writing Center?

- Our Writing Lab is modeled on an idea which is more universally called a Writing Center. The majority of US and UK universities, and many European universities, have a Writing Center (or Centre).

- Here are a few examples:

<https://www.du.edu/writing/writingcenter/>

<https://owl.purdue.edu/>

<https://www.york.ac.uk/students/studying/skills/writing-and-language-skills-centre/>

<https://www.europa.uni.de/en/struktur/zsfl/institutionen/schreibzentrum/index.html>

“The Idea of a Writing Center”

- In this article published in 1984, Stephen North defended the work of Writing Centers in eloquent terms and articulated some basic philosophies of Writing Centers:
- “[A writing center] “represents the marriage of what are arguably the two most powerful contemporary perspectives on teaching writing: first, that writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered.”

“The Idea of a Writing Center”

- “In a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction... Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing.”
- “Any given project - a class assignment, a law school application letter, an encyclopedia entry, a dissertation proposal - is for the writer the prime, often the exclusive concern. That particular text, its success or failure, is what brings them to talk to us in the first place. In the center, though, we look beyond or through that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced.”

Text-centered vs. Writer-centered pedagogy

- Instead of:
 - Correcting or proofreading a writer's text
 - Telling a writer exactly what they should do next
 - Focusing on errors the writer has made
 - Focusing on the ways a writer's draft deviates from an (imagined) ideal, finished text
- A writing center consultant:
 - Asks the writer questions about their writing process, about their purpose for writing, and about their intended audience(s) (in an academic environment, we're aware that one audience is the classroom teacher!)
 - Asks the writer how they view their text, what they notice in it, and what their concerns are, and directs the writer's attention to larger patterns (say, two or three at a time) which may be influencing these issues
 - Shows the writer successful models – both model texts, and model methods for consciously intervening in their own writing process
 - Helps the writer decide on and two or three actionable steps for the future, with the idea that writing is a continuous process of revision

Writing Consultations

- Some basic points/concepts/methods for one-on-one writing consultations:
 - 45-minutes, more or less
 - Body language: Consultant and writer sit side-by-side; writer retains physical control of their text, with resources at hand
 - Consultant begins (and continues as much as possible) with *questions* for the writer
 - Consultant asks writer to read short sections of the text, asks them what they notice
 - Consultant and writer maintain focus on connecting larger (macro) patterns in the text with micro issues (rather than getting lost in the heap of individual errors)
 - As the session comes to a close, consultant and writer come to an agreement about what the writer can do next (2 or 3 concrete steps)
 - When the session is over, both the consultant and writer produce a record of the consultation

What we need...

- Promotion / support from you!
- A website on the MUNI / CJV server
- Money ;)

What do you think?

- Would you send your students to us for a writing consultation?
- Do you have questions / concerns about how writer-centered pedagogy works?
- Are there ways we could make the Writing Lab more accessible to the Masaryk community?