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Mutual Benefits: Pre-Service Teachers and Public School Students in the Writing Center

by Emily Isaacs and Ellen Kolba

About the Authors

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Ellen Kolba is a founding director of The Writers’ Room Program in the Montclair Public Schools and continues to co-direct this program, as well as serving as a consultant on the teaching of writing to school districts throughout northern New Jersey. She has published articles about the Writers’ Room in English Journal, New Jersey English Journal, and Clearing House, and is also the co-author of a number of supplemental textbooks on writing.

In a World Literature class at Montclair High School, a ninth-grader and a college student sit side by side, looking at a piece of freewriting that Tiffany, the younger student, has just produced.

"These are just kind of my random ideas about friends — you know, what the word ‘friend’ makes me think of, some of the stuff I like to do with my friends, that kind of thing. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do next."

"Here’s one idea that really comes through to me," responds Kyle, a pre-service teacher who is a student in the “Teaching Writing” course at Montclair State University (MSU). "See where you’ve used the word ‘loyal’ and then a little farther on, ‘loyalty?’ Sounds like that’s something that’s very important to you."

Tiffany nods agreement. "I couldn’t have a friend that wasn’t loyal to me — and I’d have to be loyal to her, too."

"That might be a good way to begin this essay," says Kyle.

As Tiffany’s coach for the next ten minutes, it’s Kyle’s job to help her discover the possibilities in what she’s written so far and figure out what her next step should be.

Scenes like this one are played out frequently in the middle schools and high schools of Montclair, N.J., as Montclair State students come into the classrooms to join community volunteers as university writing coaches. The hours they put into coaching students are part of a service-learning course that has grown out of a long-term partnership between the university and the Montclair Public Schools. Reflecting on the genesis and evolution of this partnership, we have begun to realize its importance in shaping future English teachers. Working in a writing center setting within the classroom, we have discovered, provides pre-service teachers with an opportunity not only to work with student writers one-on-one but also to experience a model of best practice in teaching writing. The mutual benefits of our partnership extend to the public school students who are being coached, to the MSU students who are preparing to be teachers, and to the generations of students they will eventually teach.

Writing centers are primarily valued by outsiders for what tutors provide to student writers, but as others have observed and documented (Brannon and North; Trimbire; Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail), and as those of us who work in writing centers quickly discover, writing centers offer important benefits to the student tutors who work in them. Further, those of us who hire and supervise faculty who teach writing have learned the long-term value of tutoring: writing centers are ideal places for the training of writing teachers. From their cross-institutional, extensive research on the long-term effects of peer tutoring on tutors, Gillespie, Hughes and Kail conclude, “The peer writing tutor experience is not only service work; it is professional preparation” (4). Clearly, in a writing center with strong training and support, writing centers can become
This is the kind of program that is well supported through service-learning and community-based learning initiatives, which have become popular in universities generally (see Maurrasse) and in English departments in particular. While community-based learning in English departments is frequently connected to first-year writing courses (Deans; Mathieu; Zlotkowski), education faculty have also been developing community-based courses that place teaching candidates in schools prior to their formal end-of-program field experience. Recent publications (in English: Deans; Mathieu; Zlotkowski; in Education: Anderson and Pickeral; Donahue; Erikson and Anderson; McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca) speak to the fact that universities are encouraging faculty to participate in service-learning opportunities. For example, universities are expanding community-based learning initiatives (Salgado) by developing administrative centers, providing faculty with incentives for participation, and encouraging students to participate in these programs. Similarly, we have observed that writing center directors and English teachers in public school systems—always struggling with writing and funding—are encouraged by administrators to work with academic programs, or when outside of the institution, to go to the “university up the road” to benefit from university students, who are often seen as having lots of time on their hands that could be better spent through service.

For writing center people in both schools and universities, collaborating and developing partnerships is familiar work; however, crossing the secondary/post-secondary divide for more than brief forays is uncommon. For many reasons, when it comes to the practice of teaching writing, universities are often disconnected from schools, despite many common concerns and goals. Yet whether intent on a career in a university or a public school, all writing teachers need to be familiar with, for example, Janet Emig’s seminal work on twelfth graders and Mina Shaughnessy’s work with re-entry remedial college students. In these foundational studies and the theoretical work that accompanied them, the writing process movement was born. Forty years later, the basic understanding that the act of writing is recursive, that good writers revise more than weak ones, and that writers improve when they receive specific feedback on works-in-progress has remained crucial to developing strong writing instruction.
and support for writers of all ages. Yet outside of our preparatory coursework and scholarship, retaining these connections in practice and collaborating across the schools-university divide is still too rare.

The methodologies of the process approach — planning, drafting, feedback, and revising — are widely recognized as best practice by writing teachers and researchers, as well as by the comprehensive Department of Education study, *NAEP 1996 Trends in Writing*, which concludes, "the process approach to writing, in which planning, writing, and revision through several drafts are practiced, gives students the opportunity to write more and to employ editing strategies, which in turn affords them the opportunity to improve their mastery of... writing conventions" (qtd. in Williams 99-100). In a similar vein, a more recent study demonstrates the efficacy of substantive feedback for middle-school language arts students (Pathey-Chavez, Matsumura, and Valdés). Yet these methodologies are also underutilized across all age groups (Williams 40). As Williams, Yagelski, and Scherff and Piazza have documented, for example, it is clear that despite strong programs in many K-12 classrooms, students still write one-shot, unrevised papers too frequently. In addition, in the writing required for state and national assessments, writers receive no feedback and papers are not revised.

This approach to instruction, the current-traditional approach, retains its tenacious hold because of two major problems: poor or little composition training in many teachers’ preparatory coursework and the great amount of time that sound writing instruction requires. As Yagelski notes, it is clear from Applebee’s 1993 comprehensive research on the focus of English curriculum, and Scherff and Piazza’s 2005 study of secondary school writing in Florida that “little process writing [is] occurring in classrooms” and that “in spite of advances in writing research, little has changed in many high schools” (270). While the problem of introducing process writing to secondary schools is being addressed by individual teachers and programs, the fact remains that many university faculty teaching in English Education programs come from backgrounds in teaching literature, not writing, and many high school and middle school teachers are prepared to be teachers of literature or reading, not writing. Although all language arts and English teachers find themselves responsible for improving writing, few are likely to be truly familiar with or committed to teaching writing as a process.

In this article we suggest that writing centers can be central — not secondary or incidental — to the training of future teachers. Further, we model a way to bridge the gap between middle/secondary school and university programs through service learning, enabling a sustainable, mutually beneficial partnership to emerge and thrive. We will explain the partnership we have created with the aim of providing a model — or a jumping-off place — for future school-university partnerships and for writing center based training of future English/Language Arts teachers at the middle and high school levels.

**What Is the Partnership?**

In our partnership, English Education students enrolled in Teaching Writing Grades 6-12 join community volunteers in working with middle and secondary school students as writing coaches. The term “coach” suggests a supportive role, and the coaches work with students at all stages of the writing process. At the most basic level, The Writers’ Room Program gains additional coaches, and the MSU English Education program is able to ground students’ theoretical work in composition theory in the practice of one-on-one coaching. Further, through this program we gain something else: access to institutions that are important to our work and the opportunity to have a greater impact on how writing is taught in public schools. In the next two sections, each of us will describe our half of the partnership.

**The Writers’ Room Program — Ellen**

Sheila Crowell and I began The Writers’ Room Program in the spring of 1993, as a support service for World Literature, the newly de-tracked ninth-grade English program at Montclair High School. Montclair and its public school system, in a New Jersey town just twelve miles west of New York City, are sometimes labeled “urban-suburban.” The town’s location and housing stock make it a suburb, but its demographics qualify it as urban. The student body, numbering well over 6,500, is approximately forty percent African-
American, with about sixteen percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch—a reflection of the prized economic, racial, and ethnic diversity of the town itself. The school district has long been focused on increasing minority achievement and reducing the achievement gap, and these were important considerations in the decision both to de-track ninth grade English and to fund The Writers’ Room Program.

The World Literature course, required of all ninth graders, is taught at the high honors level in heterogeneous grouped classes and includes a strong revision-based writing strand. It assumes that students will receive substantive feedback and produce multiple drafts of their essays. As a result, the writing curriculum is dependent on the regular conferencing and feedback that trained volunteer coaches can provide.

Sheila and I were professional editors and writers as well as parents in the Montclair Public Schools. Starting in 1989, we began working as parent volunteers and gradually developed a way of coaching students at all levels, from second grade through high school, by identifying their strengths and suggesting what steps to take next. More importantly, we had figured out how to teach others to coach in the same way. Our ranks have grown since we trained our first twenty volunteers in 1993; we now have over two hundred coaches working in Montclair’s English/Language Arts classrooms from fourth grade through twelfth grade. Although at the start we were funded by grants, The Writers’ Room Program is now a line item in the district’s budget, and its services are well integrated into the district’s curriculum. It is entirely non-profit (though we trade-marked the name a few years ago to insure consistency), and managers—all part-time employees—are paid minimal salaries with no benefits.

Despite what is implied by its name, The Writers’ Room is not a place. Though we had originally envisioned a room that would function as a drop-in center (on the model of college and university writing centers), it quickly became clear that no room was available. We had also, using as a guide Pamela Farrell’s book *The High School Writing Center* and some personal guidance from Pam, envisioned a program that was teacher-run; our job would be simply to get it off

the ground.¹ But this was not feasible, given the cost of teachers’ salaries and benefits. Finally, it was unrealistic to expect students to drop in, for they simply had no time during the day in which they could. As a result, within the first semester of its operation, The Writers’ Room took on the form it has retained for the last sixteen years. Two General Managers coordinate the program as a whole, deal with staffing and budget, provide an interface with the Central Office Administration and the Board of Education, work with MSU, and help train the community volunteers. In addition, other managers (people who have started as coaches) are responsible for building the program in the individual schools, as well as training and supervising volunteers who work with students right in the classroom. Bringing coaches into the classroom has strengthened a point we have insisted on from the start: coaches work with all students, not just those perceived as in need of help. We are responsible for helping everyone to grow, from the profoundly disabled to the very gifted.

Because of the presence of The Writers’ Room Program, the curricula of the elementary, middle, and high schools have gradually shifted to make room for revision-based writing. English/Language Arts teachers set aside a writing workshop period every week or two. During that time, the manager and usually two to four coaches are in the classroom, conferencing with students on whatever they are writing. Sometimes it’s a piece of the student’s own choice—a poem, story, personal reflection, or play. Often it’s a teacher-generated topic—a personal narrative, persuasive essay, response to literature, or a research paper. Once in a while, it’s even an assignment from another content area—social studies, science, math, art, physical education, or dance. Typically, students see coaches at any one (or more) of several points: as the students start prewriting and articulate their points, during the process of drafting, when drafts are finished and students are ready to revise; and or when second (or third) drafts are ready for editing.

When a coach sits down with a student, what happens is always the same. The coach starts with what’s on the page (or what’s in the student’s head if nothing has reached the page yet). The first response is to identify what works in the content and organization—the words, phrases, and sentences that reveal what the student is trying to say
and perhaps give the reader a sense of the writer’s individual voice. Coaches identify those strengths as specifically as possible and explain why those particular words, phrases, or sentences work in order to provide students with revision strategies they can internalize and use again. Rather than using a rubric or checklist that might suggest a set of prior expectations, the coach summarizes the results of the conference in writing on a two-part carbonless form. The student keeps one to guide him or her through the next step, and The Writers’ Room keeps one for its records.

Here is an example from a response to a ninth-grade paper on *Of Mice and Men*. One of the things the coach has written in the “Strengths” section of the response sheet is “Good attempt to combine quotes and explanations— for example, in paragraph 4, where you explain why Crooks feels so helpless.” Here is the comment the same coach has written under “Suggestions for Revision”: “To improve your draft, do a little more of the explaining. In paragraph 4, for example, say more about the scene you’re quoting from— Who is Crooks talking to? What’s happening?”

All this sounds quite simple, but as writing center directors know, it is tremendously difficult to do well, which is why we put so much emphasis on training the coaches. Every coach attends six weeks of training seminars— about ninety minutes a week for the community volunteers and a little less for the MSU coaches, in order to fit into their class schedule. In the training seminars we do two things. We practice a number of thinking and organizing strategies— for instance, ways to use graphic organizers or visualization that can help students who are stuck. We also practice responding to actual first drafts of papers by Montclair students, working especially on matching the response to the level of proficiency the student has displayed— not overwhelming a novice writer with a dozen ways to “fix” the draft and not shrinking from making suggestions for revision when the writer is already working at a high level. As we remind our volunteers, our job is to think about what the writer needs, not just what the paper needs.

In order to extend this training to the university students in “Teaching Writing,” the General Managers have trained each of the MSU faculty members who have taught this course, and all of them have spent some time as coaches in the Montclair schools. Gemma Sullivan and I, the General Managers of the program since the 2004-05 school year, work with the MSU teacher, each of us taking a small group of students to train. Working directly with the MSU students and meeting regularly with their teachers, we are able to see ways in which our training can be adjusted to the needs of the university students. It has also made us aware that we need ongoing give-and-take with MSU in order to maximize the benefits of the partnership for both the university and the Montclair public schools.

Clearly, our partnership has had both advantages and disadvantages. As is often the case for writing centers, our status as outsiders— The Writers’ Room Program was in the schools but not of the schools— made us eager to develop some sort of institutional affiliation. A first connection with MSU was established when Sara Jonesberg, a newly arrived member of the MSU faculty, contacted us and became a coach in our second semester of operation. Sara headed the English Education program at MSU, and she soon began suggesting very strongly to new students in the program that they contact us and become coaches as well. By 1994, we were coaching in the middle schools in addition to the high school, and we welcomed the additional help from the MSU students.

The affiliation with the university was appealing to us in another way as well: it added to our credibility when we made presentations or conducted workshops at meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, or the International Writing Centers Association. The majority of our peers at these meetings came from universities— either from university-based writing centers or from university-public school partnerships. The association with MSU put us on a common footing, even though in our case the roles played by the university and the public school system were different. Rather than being a product of the university’s reaching out to the local public schools, we existed prior to the MSU connection and would have gone on functioning and growing without it. There was another, less tangible but equally important, benefit for us. It brought us into the academic discourse community. Over the years, working with MSU faculty and students, we began to develop a larger theoretical framework for what we were doing. Our
training seminars for community volunteers have always been very practical and hands-on—reading and responding to student writing of all kinds—but gradually we have added reading material from the world of English Education—primarily, articles from *English Journal, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *The Writing Lab Newsletter*.

We have also begun to think, talk, and write differently about what we do. At the start, for example, we identified the strengths we saw in students’ writing because we wanted to make sure the things that worked weren’t discarded in the revision. The more papers we read, though, the more we realized that the strength a student exhibited in one paragraph might be exactly what was needed in another. We found our very practical discovery confirmed by Peter Elbow in his *College English* article “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment.” Elbow led us to an important insight: when we identify strengths, we are giving students strategies for revision. This, in turn, became the subject of our own article, “Turning Strengths into Strategies” (Kolba and Crowell). Similarly, the extensive writing center literature that we often discovered after the fact (especially the work of Lil Brannon, Muriel Harris, Stephen North, Gary Olson, and James Upton) gave us theoretical language to reinforce what we were finding in practice.

The advantages of the collaboration, for us, are clear. Every fall, as many as twenty new coaches come from MSU’s Service Learning Program to work at Montclair High School and in Montclair’s three middle schools. But the disadvantages are clear, too. We work hard to train, supervise, and evaluate the MSU students (work for which there is no extra compensation), and before our semester is over, they’re gone.

However, the advantages of our connection with MSU far outweigh the disadvantages. That’s why we agreed to work with MSU students both first and second semester when the service-learning course expanded and became more central to MSU’s English Education program. Our work has doubled but so have the benefits. The Writers’ Room Program managers now find the help provided by the student coaches from MSU invaluable. The growth of The Writers’ Room Program—some of it spurred by the testing demands of No Child Left Behind—has made us greedy for additional help. We are also looking forward to the possibility of having an intern who can work with one or more of the managers as a lead coach, supervising volunteer coaches in the classroom when the manager needs to be in two classes at the same time, and relieving the manager of some of the administrative chores. Finally, the Writers’ Room Program might provide an excellent laboratory for anyone at MSU who wants to do some research on how children and adolescents develop as writers and especially on what kinds of intervention promote their growth as writers. Every year, as budget time rolls around in the Montclair Public Schools, the Writers’ Room Program is called on to justify itself with “hard data.” We are eager to be the subject of a study that could help show how the service we provide makes a difference to Montclair’s students.

Even though it’s a lot of work, there is also pleasure in our association with MSU. All the managers from The Writers’ Room enjoy working with students of all ages and seeing them flourish as writers and/or coaches. Introducing this way of responding to student writing to new coaches and guiding them through their first sessions with students is always a positive experience. Most of all, it is heartening to think that many of the MSU students will eventually be teachers and that some of what they have learned from working with The Writers’ Room Program will become part of the way they teach.

**Teaching Writing Grades 6-12**—Emily

Shortly after joining the English Department at MSU as a fresh Ph.D. with a dissertation in composition studies, I became interested in contributing to the English Education program, which was, like most English Education programs, dominated by instruction in general pedagogy and mastery of literature. I was directing a first-year writing program and the university’s writing center, so most of my work was focused on literacy instruction and support at the post-secondary level. In our program for graduate students, I observed that the best training ground for teaching writing came from the writing center; working one-on-one in the writing center while also participating in a practicum class provided novices with excellent training for teaching writing at the secondary or college level. I wanted to see if the skills I taught for developing literacy in college students would
work as well with secondary school students, as I argued was the case to skeptical English teachers who took my graduate courses in composition studies. In New Jersey most teachers do not begin with an M.A., but simply go straight into teaching with an English major and certification. To have an impact on how secondary teachers teach writing, I needed to do work on the undergraduate level. Thus the genesis of my course came from a serious deficit in the curriculum, my observation of the rapid and profound effect that one-on-one tutoring had on the writing center tutors I trained, and my own interest in learning more about teaching writing in secondary schools.

As a result, before learning of The Writers’ Room Program, I had begun to develop a course in teaching writing for students in middle and high school. When I was introduced to Ellen and Sheila, we all agreed that it would be wonderful if students taking my new course could also work in The Writers’ Room. At my initial training, it became clear that, in large part, we all came from the same theoretical and research base. Fundamentally, we all believe that student writers grow when they revise, that students need to develop from their strengths, and that feedback on writing needs to come during the process of drafting and needs to be specific, well-explained, and hopeful. Our shared vision had many sources, but that we all had strong, formative experiences with one-on-one tutorials was central.

In the fall of 2002, I taught the course for the first time. Set up informally, the “service” arrangement consisted of a simple statement in my syllabus requiring students to coach in The Writers’ Room, and I imported Sheila and Ellen to my class to run their volunteer training with my students. By coming to my class and conducting the training seminars, they maintained control of their program, making sure that my students were, as much as possible, coming to the Montclair schools under their guidance.

By the fall of 2003, MSU’s Center for Community-Based Learning found out what I was up to and worked to bring me into its fold. I received some training, the most memorable of which was information about the town of Montclair and about the detracked World Literature course at Montclair High School. With the university’s Center for Community-Based Learning on board, some of our work became easier, as the center has staff who have helped in various ways—for example, getting students signed up with one of the four schools and handling all liability issues.

The work with The Writers’ Room Program comprises just a part of the MSU students’ coursework. Aside from the training and the coaching, students read and write about composition and writing center theory and practice. An important text is an ethnography or auto-ethnography, such as Danling Fu’s The Trouble is My English, that provides readers with a rich understanding of the complexity of teaching writing. Portraits of teachers, such as those found in Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson’s Through Teachers’ Eyes, allow students to see the pressures that come to bear on teachers as they strive to teach writing to a diverse group of students while also meeting administrative and political pressures. Articles on specific aspects of the practice of teaching writing—for example, prewriting activities, revision strategies, evaluation, style—are discussed in light of the literacy instruction that students are observing and participating in. Finally, the university students engage in an intensive writing experience themselves. These writings become platforms for further instruction in methods of feedback; students are taught effective peer review and are exposed to a range of feedback methods from their instructor, including the one-on-one conference. By engaging in one-on-one coaching while benefiting from a process-writing pedagogy as writers, students are given an immersive experience in revision-based writing, one they will need in order to counteract the negative messages about teaching writing that too many future teachers will receive from cooperating teachers (as has been observed by Yagelski and Root).

Because of the partnership with The Writers’ Room Program, students see that public middle and high schools with diverse student bodies can support revision-based writing. They see how a wide range of writers improve their writing and gain confidence in themselves as writers through interaction with an engaged reader and the development of multiple drafts. At the same time, they observe and experience the many forces that work against this kind of instruction, and they see first-hand how a public school system struggles to maintain a strong writing program despite the local, state, and national pressures of testing and funding—and succeeds.
Since even in the best school systems and writing programs there is pressure to correct and evaluate writing rather than to teach it, future classroom teachers need to be prepared to resist the pressure to simply “solve” students’ immediate problems (e.g., fix the grammar, and tell students what to write). Teaching writing is slow and unpredictable, and real change may not be visible for months. Teachers need to be prepared for these realities so that they can be patient with their students and, armed with experience and research, firm with their colleagues and administrators.

This program helps my students (and me) directly and thoughtfully address the theory-practice conflict that my more advanced graduate students—those who are practicing teachers—frequently comment on. Students quickly discover that, while teaching writing as a process seems obvious and reasonable in theory, in practice it is not obvious, and run against dominant ideologies and practices in schools and in the culture at large. This collaborative-learning program engages students in bringing theory to practice, and vice versa, as recommended by McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca in their study of what enables new English and language arts teachers to be successful. They conclude,

While it is critical for pre-service teachers to have a grasp of the theory that guides planning and practice, it is also important to be familiar with specific “real world” problems that might challenge teachers to remain true to a theoretical mode for instruction. (129)

It is important to acknowledge that there are challenges to the collaboration for MSU students and faculty. Students at MSU typically work at least twenty hours a week and most live off campus. They have little time, so they see a community-based learning course as a burden. Their initial reaction can be negative, and it takes a bit of persuasion to get them enthusiastically on board. Further, faculty have to cut down their syllabi, and they have to give up the first six classes for The Writers’ Room Program training, time that is typically spent establishing relationships and setting the intellectual agenda for a class. Finally, there are the logistics to cope with: finding a time and spot for every coach, negotiating a solution for a very weak coach. What is most stressful and also important, for me, is making sure that my writing center partners find the experience worthwhile. I worry that it’s too burdensome, that my students aren’t appreciated, or that possibly we’re not supporting The Writers’ Room in the way that Ellen and Gemma and their staff of managers would like. There’s the stress of interdependence—it is exciting and worth it, but for faculty who are used to autonomous work, it can be challenging.

Nonetheless, students’ positive experiences with the course have led me to seek further research on the role of writing centers and other service-learning opportunities that can provide reflective practice as part of the coursework for preparing future teachers. I am working on a qualitative research project that aims to discover more clearly how theory and practice intersect for students. More practically, following a trend of collaboration between other university writing centers and English Education programs, the success of this course has led me to develop a second service-learning course, Peer Tutoring in Writing, which links studies of marginalized students’ writing needs and the institutions that marginalize them with tutoring work in the university writing center. For The Writers’ Room Program I have recruited new faculty to join the partnership, and I am working with the Center for Community-Based Learning to fund and supervise the intern Ellen mentioned above and to add a second section so that we can provide more MSU student coaches to The Writers’ Room staff. I am also developing a grant proposal to support research and supervision of English Education students who are active in developing their writing pedagogies through participation in our collaborative program. Finally, I am working with the English Education directors to require this course for future teachers, thus doing our part to prepare future teachers to teach writing well.

Beyond the value of reciprocity between our two programs—which is important, these kinds of initiatives enable university writing specialists to be proactive in preparing future English teachers to teach writing well.

Ultimately, what makes me continue with the program, without any second thoughts, are the students’ responses. Most students come to find participation in The Writers’ Room—despite the difficulties of transportation, confusion over logistics, sessions canceled because of such usual public school interruptions as fire drills and field trips.
and the interpersonal challenges of working in an existing volunteer program—to be the best part of the course. They rave about it. They fall in love with the students and they feel important and valued. They also see students struggle with literacy, and this prompts them to engage passionately with course material, not simply as observers, but as reflective, if novice, practitioners who, as Donald Schön notes of the best practitioners in any field, conduct "research in the practice context" (68) and "make their own distinctive ways of knowing about teaching and learning more visible to themselves and others" (115). The course is a rich one, one that could stand alone without the work in the writing center. But having The Writers' Room component is without a doubt worth it.

Reflections on Our Collaboration: Why It Works

As our individual narratives demonstrate, each of us is deeply invested in our part of the partnership. The Writers' Room would go on without MSU students, and Teaching Writing Grades 6-12 would go on without The Writers’ Room. But we are sure our individual programs are better for our collaboration—and we are sure of the rich opportunities that are possible when writing centers and English Education programs collaborate through service learning. John Tinker, writing of the Stanford University Writing Center's recent and impressive work building bridges with secondary schools, observes that Stanford's initial efforts were unsuccessful because they had begun without building relationships with secondary school faculty and administrators, in short, without being truly collaborative. He writes, “What we have learned—and should have known from the start, given the collaborative nature of writing center work—is that the more collaborative the relationship between secondary schools and universities is, the more likely it is to succeed” (89). Similarly, Tiffany Rousculp, in her thoughtful reflection on the partnership between the writing center at Salt Lake City Community College and a community writing center, asserts that this partnership was able to continue productively only once all involved realized that “The project had to become jointly shared by the college and the community and provide mutually-beneficial ends to each” (86). This is advice that can’t be repeated enough: collaborations such as ours, now in its eighth year, work because each partner listens to the other's needs and because we come together as partners with both something to offer and something that we need.

The possibility for productive, equal partnerships between secondary school writing centers and university writing centers or English Education programs is especially feasible today when we see significant encouragement and support opportunities from service-learning centers. Expectations for English Education students to do more schools-based work prior to graduation (McCann et al.), and finally, within our own world, exciting calls for expanding the mission and impact of university, college, and, we’d hasten to add, K-12 and community writing centers (for the latter, see Peck, Flower, and Higgins; Rousculp). What is required for this work to succeed is careful collaboration.

Michele Eodice, in “Breathing Lessons,” marvelously argues that for writing center people, collaborative work comes easily and is central to all that we do. While, as Eodice points out, the need for our collaborative, inventive approaches to problem-solving (everything from budgets to student schedules) are necessary because of limited resources, we would be wise to embrace and capitalize on our great gifts for making our centers and ourselves central to institutions with clout through the powerful tool of collaboration. She says, “we might begin to recognize and activate our fundamental resource: we are really good at understanding and practicing collaboration” (125). Or, as Pam Childers and James Upton argue in their aptly named article, “Political Issues in Secondary School Writing Centers” (and as Ellen can testify), a secondary writing center that aims to survive, and thrive, must constantly be on the lookout for opportunities to become essential and to make alliances with powerful individuals and programs within and without the institution; “directors must keep revising their roles both within and outside the institution of learning to adapt to changes both favorable and unfavorable” (109).

The enormous work of educating future K-12 teachers, a pressing local, state, and national concern, offers us an additional way to be essential, and to do so without in any way compromising the goal of supporting writers through one-to-one tutorials.

As Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris, in concert with Lil
Brannon and Steve North, suggest, the future of writing centers lies in becoming central to the educational enterprise of the university, and to this we add, the school. Kinkead and Harris propose that writing centers will need to be “viewed as ‘guardians’ of writing ... assuming on many campuses a major role in the teaching of writing” (23). Might not our writing centers also become a legitimate and recognized, even formalized, place, not just for the teaching of writing, but also for the teaching of future K-12 teachers of writing?

In some ways this work of training future K-12 teachers of writing through writing center work is so obvious and appropriate it’s hard to believe there has not been more explicit scholarship making this argument and documenting these kinds of programs. Notably, while there is significant scholarship in the field calling for writing center work as a training ground for teaching assistants and college writing teachers (Cogie-Harris, “Today”; Lanetta, McCamley, and Quick; King, Williams, and Castner)—that is, university writing center tutoring for university teaching—there is little research arguing for writing centers training K-12 literacy educators. We suspect that part of the reason for this apparent omission is institutional and bureaucratic. First, English Education programs have historically been located primarily within the domains of education departments, and secondarily within the confines of literature programs, intent on training future language arts and English teachers in interpreting and teaching literature. It’s difficult, though not impossible, to break through these domains and offer courses such as the one described here, much less to see these required of English Education students. Second, as noted earlier, university-school partnerships remain challenging, particularly for university writing centers that quite reasonably have gravitated toward partnerships on campus.

Finally, university and college writing centers are notoriously short-staffed, seldom able to offer the tutoring needed on campus. Until the advancement of service learning, there have not been many ways for writing centers to support tutoring off-campus. Today writing centers are exploring service-learning possibilities as ways to build strong peer-tutoring programs within the university. What we suggest is going the next step: bring peer tutoring, through writing centers, to students outside the university, and do so in such a way that writing centers become participants in the important work of training future K-12 literacy instructors.

In 2007, we contacted the students who took Teaching Writing Grades 6-12 in the Fall of 2003; four years later, their reflections on the value of working with middle- and secondary-school students in school-based writing centers were uniformly positive. Alexis Biren, now a teacher at Bloomfield Middle School, writes: “The time I spent at the Writers’ Room at Montclair High was among the most rewarding and helpful training that I got all through college, and I am forever grateful. I actively use and remember plenty.” Another former class member, Shannon Dailey, now a middle school language arts teacher in Wayne, a large suburb in New Jersey with a diverse population, speaks specifically to the ways in which The Writers’ Room experience of individual tutoring is one she still practices today, despite the many demands placed on her:

There is no better advantage to have than the opportunity to work with students 1-on-1 to get hands-on experience... College courses can prepare you and professors can ‘teach you how,’ but nothing comes close to sitting down with students to find out what works and what doesn’t. Conferencing has shown me that students need that time with their teacher to focus on both strengths and weaknesses.

Notably, like Alexis, Shannon is duplicating the very language and practices she learned from the course and from The Writers’ Room Program.

For Alexis and Shannon, as for so many English Education students whose pre-service training included work in The Writers Room, the experience of working as writing coaches while learning about teaching writing through reading, class discussion, and writing for class, was important to their development into successful high school English teachers. These students, who took this course as an elective, found themselves better prepared to teach secondary school writing than their colleagues, leading Alexis to advise:

I feel strongly that education students at MSU need more frequent and smaller tries at teaching before the big STUDENT TEACHING happens. This is a HUGE thing I appreciated about being at the WR—I had contact with students in a ‘real time’ setting, and also got to practice what real
teachers do...and teach the kids how to be better, in this case, writers! There aren’t that many opportunities to have low-key field-training sessions like the one I had, and that is really too bad.

As a university professor and a public school writing center director, we are thrilled to see the impact our program has had on the students who had the opportunity to enroll in it. Even more important, we hear Alexis’s advice loud and clear. First, as individuals we pledge to expand the reach of our program, in particular by taking steps to require it of all English Education students. Second, we hope we have persuaded both university and secondary school faculty to consider developing at their own schools similar ways for future teachers to benefit from the training that a writing center can provide.²

NOTES

1. For a recent, practical guide to creating a teacher-initiated high school writing center, see A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers: Grades 6-12, by Richard Kent.

2. If you are interested in communicating with either of us about your plans for writing center-based teacher training, we can be reached as follows: Emily Isaacs at Isaacs@millmontclair.edu and Ellen Kolba at Emkolba@aol.com.

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Dailey, Shannon. “Teaching Writing Response.” E-mail to Emily Isaacs. 8 June 2007.


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