

# An Introduction to Tutoring in the Writing Centre

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**Introduction to AISHE  
Academic Practice Guides**

This series is dedicated to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Dr John Panter, 15 April 1941 – 13 November 2015.

*Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam dílis*

The All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) is pleased to bring you a new series of booklets, each of which offers guidance on a particular theme, for practitioners in higher education. Entitled the AISHE Academic Practice Guides, the series is designed to support the development of teaching and learning in practice.

The booklets are written by practitioners, for practitioners. Based on experience and scholarship, each guide offers an overview of the particular topic to help readers situate the experiences presented in other sections of the booklet. Case studies or examples of practice from contributors' higher education experience are presented and, finally, each booklet suggests resources that the reader may find helpful in their own practice.

We acknowledge the work of all those colleagues, networks and communities of practice who contributed to the project through writing, providing case studies and co-ordinating contributions in order to bring the series to publication.

Moira Maguire, AISHE President  
Saranne Magennis, Series Editor

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# Foreword

This booklet is one of a series commissioned by the All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) and the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW). It is intended as a first step for colleagues who are new to the idea of a writing centre in a higher education institute. The booklet is organised into two sections. Part 1 provides a brief overview, which answers some broad questions about tutoring in a writing centre. Part 2 presents four approaches to tutoring in writing centres.

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In addition, we thank Maria-Jose Gonzalez, Jessica Vaught, Rachel Lachut, Russell Carpenter, Matthew Martin, and Djuddah Leijen all of whom contributed the institution-specific approaches to this publication. Finally, we acknowledge the contribution of many tutors and writing centre personnel who attended the national peer-tutoring forum at the University of Limerick in May 2015. Their discussions on that day formed the basis of the section entitled ‘Effective tutoring – lessons learned’.

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# Part 1 – Introduction to this booklet – purpose and audience

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## Purpose and audience

The purpose of this booklet is to provide readers with an introduction to tutoring in writing centres in higher education institutes. It is intended to provide an overview of the ethos and practical work of tutoring in this context. It will be of particular interest to colleagues working in higher education in Ireland.

## Overview of tutoring in higher education writing centres

The idea, purpose, philosophy and pedagogy of a writing centre is a complex topic which is explored widely in the mainstream academic literature and, more recently, online in websites, blogs, listservs etc. It is not the purpose of this booklet to consider this area in any depth. For an overview of this work, we direct the interested reader to other related booklets in this series and to Barnett and Blumner (2001), Harris (1985), Hobson (1992), North (1984), and Ryan and Zimmereilli (2016). The development of writing centres in the Irish higher education context can be explored further in Cleary et al. (2009), Cleary and O’Sullivan (2015), Tighe-Mooney and Farrell (2015), Farrell and Tighe-Mooney (2015) and O’Sullivan and Cleary (2012). These texts, amongst the wide variety that exist, outline items such as how writing centres are organised, the philosophies that are frequently employed, the pedagogy associated with tutoring and the research that informs approaches. The contribution that this booklet makes to the conversation on writing centres is to consider tutoring. In this regard, we suggest what we have found most useful, how we achieve our goals, what the different stages in tutoring might be, and how a range of tutoring approaches are required at different times depending on the student and the writing stage and/or task.

As noted in another of the publications in this series, *An Introduction to Higher Education Writing Centres* (Farrell et al., 2015), the core activity of a

writing centre tends to be the provision of one-to-one consultations between staff of the writing centre and students. These consultations take the form of tutoring, where the tutors are typically either peer tutors or expert tutors. The make up of the tutor cohort will vary from institution to institution and will be impacted by any number of factors, not least among them the pedagogical philosophy/approach adopted by the writing centre and the available resources. In this overview, we discuss, albeit very briefly, peer and expert tutoring, and general and specific/discipline-specific tutoring. It should be remarked that the particular approach that an institution adopts under these two broad headings will be context specific and, therefore, even under the general approaches, there will be much local variety and rich diversity of provision.

## PEER TUTORING OR EXPERT TUTORING

Topping suggests that ‘peer tutoring is a very old practice, traceable back at least as far as the ancient Greeks’ (1996: 322). When writing about the effectiveness of peer tutoring in 1996, Topping noted that as peer tutoring had developed, defining it had become more difficult and that, as a result, any definition that one could offer would be so broad as to be ‘rather bland’ (322). When Topping revisited this topic in 2005, he focused on peer learning which he defined as ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions. It involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers

helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing' (2005: 631). Boud et al. describe peer tutoring as the 'use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher' (1999: 413). While Karen Arrand notes, with reference to the literature (Colvin, 2007; Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad, 1998; Boud et al., 2001), that, in general, 'peer tutors help other students either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups by continuing classroom discussions, developing study skills, evaluating work, resolving specific problems and encouraging independent learning' (2014).

Various terms are used in the literature to describe this type of teaching and related approaches to learning. The terms, peer tutoring, peer instruction, peer mentoring, reciprocal peer tutoring, peer assisted learning (PAL), supplemental instruction (SI), peer assisted study sessions (PASS), cross-year small-group tutoring, personalised system of instruction, academic mentoring, academic success mentoring, co-operative learning, peer collaboration, all appear. For our purposes, in this booklet, we have agreed on the use of the term peer tutoring where we define peer tutoring as involving those of the same group, or academic standing, educating one another when one peer has more knowledge, greater experience and/or better processes and approaches (adapted from Colvin, 2007).

While peer tutoring is very common in writing centres internationally, some centres also employ expert or faculty tutors who have particular writing and/or other expertise or experience. They

may be staff who, as well as working in the writing centre, are involved in the delivery of on-campus writing programmes. Equally, they may be tutors with extensive research/postgraduate experience in that they may be pursuing doctoral studies or may be postdoctoral staff. Likewise, some tutors will have specialist discipline knowledge or they may have expert knowledge of a technical or technological nature.

#### GENERALIST OR SPECIALIST TUTORING

The notion of generalist versus specialist tutors in support for writing has existed for some time. Kristin Walker in her article 'The Debate over Generalist Tutors; Genre Theory's Contribution', written now nearly 20 years ago, remarks on the fact that then 'Over the past ten years or so, much has been written about whether writing centre tutors should be generalist or specialist' (1998: 27). More recently,

Gordon (2014) suggests that 'Using genre to guide our pedagogical strategies in the writing center can be an excellent way to achieve the goals of scaffolding students' learning, enhancing their sense of agency, and reaffirming their membership in the academic community.' Dinitz and Harrington (2013) join this conversation by examining the role of expertise in tutoring sessions. Their research suggests 'a strong connection between a tutor's knowledge of writing in the discipline, the quality of a session's agenda, and a session's overall effectiveness' (2014: 73). Laura Plummer's

blogpost of May 2015 certainly contributes to the development of this same discussion. Plummer directs Indiana University's Campus Writing Program, which administers the writing center. In a thoughtful, evidence and practice-informed manner, she considers a case for disciplinary tutoring in the writing centre. In her post, she argues for 'more discipline-specific skills among tutors but not by suggesting 'that "generalists" are ineffective.' What she proposes is that 'some basic knowledge of writing in various disciplines can at least help us sometimes avoid real gaffes and to make inroads toward higher-order, meaningful "re-envisioning" with writers' (Plummer, 2015).

In our writing centres, we employ generalist and specialist tutors, some of whom have substantial experience and expertise. Our work centres around helping our students to become better writers. The approach we take to this work depends a great deal on the writing phase and/or the stage in the writing process. When the work is very much at the expressive/informal stage, the approach is especially non-directive allowing as much space as possible for the student to expand their ideas, voice their questions and articulate their thoughts. When the writing moves closer to the transaction/formal stage, that is, where it is at the point of being given to a specific audience, often for grading, our work can concentrate on helping the student to prepare that text for the specified reader. This can be quite a technical exercise where we help the student to revise and hone their work. We encourage students to identify issues for themselves; where we identify errors they have missed, we help them to see what

is happening in the text and how to correct it. For sophisticated texts, this may call for particular specialist knowledge by the tutor. Equally, where the texts are complex, for instance, dissertations and theses, specialist tutors will have the knowledge required to help students to improve both their work and to develop the particular processes needed for longer, more complicated pieces of writing.

#### Effective tutoring – lessons learned

The literature around writing centres and the practical experience on the ground seems to converge happily on the notion that key to the success of any writing centre is its tutors. In our experience, this is certainly the case. We recognise in our work as writing centre directors (and tutors ourselves) that we are constantly learning from our interactions with students and each other, and from the conversations and reflections we share as tutors about these interactions. In the compilation of this booklet, we worked directly with tutors in order to capture their substantial wisdom on the topic of tutoring. The following sections were generated during a national workshop for new and experienced tutors, including peer and expert tutors. The insights were captured first through individual responses to various writing prompts, which were subsequently shared in small groups, before being shared with all participants, recorded on flip charts and revisited here in four sections as a series of tips, reminders, wishes, acknowledgements and advice:

- *Tips from writing centre tutors*
- *10 things I wish I had known before I started tutoring in a writing centre*
- *Things to remember*
- *Benefits of being a tutor*

The presentation of this learning in a bulleted manner, makes the contribution particularly accessible; we trust the format does not diminish the insightfulness of the work. We also hope that the balance between these short snappy contributions, and the narrative and case-based reported approaches reflects the dynamic nature of tutoring where agility in terms of approach is frequently required.

#### TIPS FROM WRITING CENTRE TUTORS

All groups working for some time within their professions could compile top tips associated with their work. This first part is what we see as the initial iteration of tips from writing centre tutors. We imagine that over the course of the development of our centres, these tips will evolve as our practice and student cohort changes.

1. *At the beginning of a session, establish the parameters and priorities for the session in consultation with the tutees, and based on the tutees' current stage in the writing process and when the assignment is due to be submitted.*
2. *Work out where to start by asking questions.*

3. *Make no assumptions about tutees' ability, knowledge or commitment.*
4. *Read the assignment brief closely in order to understand the grading criteria.*
5. *Empathise with the student, tell them how you approach assignments and listen carefully to tutees' concerns.*
6. *Help put the tutee at ease (observe body language).*
7. *Use active listening skills.*
8. *Introduce tutees to practical strategies writers can use to start and progress writing assignments, for example, free-writing, writing a "page-98 paper", etc.*
9. *Read aloud with the tutee.*
10. *Let tutees know that they can email or drop-in to their lecturers/tutors if they are not clear on an assignment.*
11. *Have an awareness of other support services in the institution so that you know where to refer tutees if you cannot help them or if they present with a query which is not related to writing.*
12. *Have a set of resources that you are familiar with nearby, for example, online resources and books.*
13. *Keep up with developments in your area and set aside time for learning about new websites, resources, etc.*
14. *Keep sharing experiences with fellow tutors.*
15. *Understand the boundaries associated with your role and look after yourself.*

#### 10 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE I STARTED TUTORING IN THE WRITING CENTRE

With the benefit of hindsight, many of us would do things differently. The following list is offered as advice to new tutors and points of reflection to existing tutors. We present this as a series of 'I wish I had known!' but it could equally be a list of 'I wish I had remembered that ...' as many of the points are things that we do know but that we fail to either recall or to employ on different occasions.

I wish I had known that ...

1. *I may not have all the answers but I know something about writing that I can share that might be useful for the tutee.*
2. *a session is a learning experience for the tutor as well as the tutee.*
3. *it is best to let the tutee lead the session and to listen carefully to what the tutee wants to work on.*
4. *I cannot expect the tutee to leave with the 'perfect' piece of writing. I can only hope that they leave with some strategies to help them to accomplish that piece of writing.*
5. *it is difficult to remain impartial and not to give advice on content.*
6. *it is important to be positive and to reassure and encourage the tutee.*
7. *I should not take the students' knowledge for granted.*

8. *Sessions in the writing centre can be intellectually very tough. It's hard work some days. It is alright to ask another tutor for advice and support.*
9. *I should not be too upset if I feel that a session has not gone as well as I hoped. As long as I have done my best and worked in line with good practice then that is all we can hope to do.*
10. *it is okay to tell students that we do not proofread.*

#### THINGS TO REMEMBER

Even though we may tutor quite regularly, we still find it useful to be reminded about the philosophical and/or practical aspects of our work. The following points cover both the philosophical and the practical, and in some instances the overlaps between them.

1. *A tutor is like a detective asking many questions.*
2. *A tutor needs a well-equipped toolkit.*
3. *A tutor has valuable experience to share, but s/he does not need to be a subject expert or even an expert in writing.*
4. *Tutoring in writing is a collaborative process where the tutor and tutee work together as they both become better writers. This process is generally non-directive. Equally, at times, the tutor can provide very useful technical advice, which can become part of the tutee's academic writing portfolio.*

5. *Writing is a way to learn and a way to learn to become a better writer.*
6. *Positive body language is extremely important.*
7. *All writers need encouragement.*
8. *A great deal of our writing is connected to how we see ourselves as writers, our writerly identity. At times (maybe often) we won't feel confident about our writing, the legitimacy of our voice or our capacity to say what we mean with authenticity.*
9. *A tutor must give various kinds of feedback.*
10. *Shared experience is an excellent tool for professional development.*

#### BENEFITS OF BEING A TUTOR

While we hope that the students we work with in the writing centre gain a great deal from attending one-to-one consultations, we acknowledge that there are also important benefits to being a tutor. These benefits are recorded in the literature in this area; equally, anecdotally, we regularly remark amongst ourselves about how much we enjoy our work and how much we learn about teaching and writing, which we can apply outside of the centre. Some of the benefits associated with being a tutor are captured here.

1. *Tutoring is very enjoyable and rewarding.*

2. *It helps raise awareness of your own writing process and skills, helping you to become more confident and objective in your own writing.*
3. *It gives you a sense of identity and belonging to a community.*
4. *It reinforces the value of learning from peers.*
5. *It helps you to evaluate writing – the more experience you gain, the more informed/aware you become.*
6. *It helps you to gain perspective on your own writing.*
7. *It provides valuable experience if considering teaching as a career.*
8. *It grants opportunities to peer into other discourse communities outside of your own discipline.*
9. *It helps build important graduate attributes.*
10. *It has financial benefits.*

#### Some last words

One-to-one tutoring in writing is at the core of writing centre activity, and writing tutors are the heart and soul of this activity. Through collaborative learning, tutors and tutees work together to enhance their writing and become confident, self-sufficient writers. Whether it is students helping students (peer tutoring) or faculty tutors helping students (expert tutoring), the desired goal is to help students become better writers. Tutors are key to

the success of any writing centre. For that reason, it was wonderful to have the input of our tutors into the compilation of this booklet. Their insights will be beneficial to colleagues training and preparing tutors to work in our writing centres. Equally, the approaches to tutoring adopted in the four cases presented in Part 2 will give readers the opportunity to understand how the issues discussed in Part 1 are implemented in practice.

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## Part 2 – An introduction to tutoring in the writing centre – four approaches

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As we mentioned at the outset, this booklet is intended as a first step for colleagues who are new to the idea of tutoring in a writing centre in a higher education institute. While there are some general trends and shared values around tutoring across most centres, we appreciate that the context is different in every institution.

In this second part, we provide some models of the practical work of tutoring in writing centres through the brief descriptions of four approaches to this work, national and international. We are very grateful to our colleagues in these institutions for their contribution and assistance. We trust that this material will further help you to work out what is best for your own institution.

The case studies are from:

- *Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland*
- *Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky, United States*
- *St Mary's University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland*
- *University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia*

## Dublin Institute of Technology

María-José González

### Introduction

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), part of a network of 14 Institutes of Technology, is a third-level institution located in the heart of Dublin, Ireland. DIT was established as an autonomous Higher Education Institution (HEI) under the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992. The Institute's origins can be traced back to six constituent higher education colleges that have offered applied and technological education in the city since the late 1800s. With an overall figure of 20,000 registered students, DIT is one of the largest higher education providers in Ireland. Its four colleges, Arts and Tourism, Business, Engineering and Built Environment, and Sciences and Health, offer over 200 programmes at undergraduate level. This academic offer is further enhanced by its postgraduate programmes at masters and PhD level. Nearly 20% of its student population come from outside Ireland, mainly from non-EU countries, creating a vibrant and culturally diverse learning environment.

Times Higher Education (THE) has ranked DIT amongst the top 100 world universities under 50 years old. Since its inception, DIT has continuously evolved, and it is now recognised for its student-centred approach, its career-focus programmes, and its diverse and innovative educational routes from apprenticeship to PhD level. DIT's educational achievements give merit to its application to become the first Technological University in Ireland. DIT is located in six main campus sites in Dublin city centre. The development of a single DIT campus at Grangegorman, a 73-acre site north of the river Liffey, will offer academic staff and students state of the art educational, research and student support facilities. Currently 1,000 students are based in Grangegorman and by 2020 a total of 10,000 students will transfer to the East and Central Quad buildings. In line with this move, the Academic Hub building will accommodate under one roof all of the student support services: Library, Disability Office, Careers Office, the Maths Learning Support Centre (MLSC) and the Academic Writing Centre (AWC). The co-location of all the student services in one single building will undoubtedly create dynamic synergies and enhance the students' learning experience. DIT's MLSC created in 2013 and the AWC in 2014 are two institute-wide initiatives in response to educational challenges identified in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 in the areas of numeracy and literacy and the increase in the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds accessing third level education. Initiatives such as the AWC and MLSC aim to address these educational challenges and remove obstacles, paving the way for a successful transition to third level education.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ACADEMIC WRITING CENTRE

The AWC currently operates as an independent unit with strong and tangible links to DIT Campus Life, to the School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences, College of Arts and Tourism (CoAT) and to the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre, (LTTTC) DIT.

Given DIT Campus Life's mission statement and its aim 'to support DIT's educational mission by providing a better student experience through the delivery of excellent services and activities and to create a vibrant campus community by embracing diversity, empowering and enabling students to reach their full potential' (DIT Campus Life Strategic Plan 2011-2014: 2), it is fitting that the original impetus and funding for the establishment of the AWC as a 3-year pilot project was approved by its committee in March 2014. Since then the AWC has also counted on the support of the School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences, and the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre. Their combined support has enabled the nascent AWC to establish itself as a valuable learning space for all. Through its links with Campus Life, the AWC is firmly embedded in the suite of supports available to all DIT students and, through its collaborative links with the LTTTC, the AWC has played a significant role in highlighting the centrality of writing for lecturing staff.

The AWC Advisory Committee was established to support the AWC's activities and to provide a focus on academic writing initiatives across the Institute. It acts as a forum to share ideas and discuss opportunities for collaboration between the AWC and other student and staff supports available in the Institute. It includes representatives from DIT's Campus Life, Library Services, academic staff including Heads of Learning Development, a student union representative and an external representative from a well-established Writing Centre in Ireland. As a new service, it is important for the AWC to promote its service and related activities. We do this in a variety of ways: by presenting the AWC at Induction Sessions for incoming students, by engaging with other student services at undergraduate and postgraduate level, by liaising with Faculty and management, and by hosting a comprehensive website on academic writing issues. The AWC website is the "go to" place in the institute for academic writing. It provides links to academic writing resources for students and staff, practical information about the centre, and details on past and future events.

The fledging AWC has benefitted greatly from the expertise of well-established writing centres in Ireland and, in particular, the generous support received from the Writing Centre at Maynooth University. This guidance and support has also resulted in a number of collaborative activities such as tutor training sessions, facilitation of academic staff workshops, and sharing of resources. Furthermore, the AWC has established valuable

links with national organisations such as the Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing (INEW) and international networks such as the European Association for Teaching Academic Writing (EATAW), and Writing Development in Higher Education (WDHE).

#### DESCRIPTION OF HOW THE WRITING CENTRE WORKS

The Academic Writing Centre provides an institutional focus on the importance of academic writing in third level education and highlights the importance of nurturing and supporting writing for academic and professional success. The AWC provides its service and related activities to students and staff. It utilises various modes of support to be closer and relevant to its target audience.

Primarily, the Academic Writing Centre is a student-facing service. It provides a free service to all DIT students who wish to enhance their academic writing competence. We welcome all students regardless of level of study (undergraduate and postgraduate), of academic discipline or educational, cultural or linguistic background. Our main focus is to respond to students' academic writing needs. Therefore, we engage directly with students principally on an individual basis either on pre-booked 'one-to-one' consultations or at drop-in sessions. As well as this mode of support, the AWC is also committed to supporting students by providing a comprehensive suite of thematic workshops on relevant aspects of academic writing.

Initial activities in this regard have resulted in workshops for undergraduate and postgraduate students. An analysis of the data related to one-to-one appointments carried out by the AWC for the academic year 2015-2016 reveals that attendees are by and large engaged in undergraduate study and that mature students and non-native speakers of English constitute a sizeable proportion of the overall number of students attending. The AWC aims to be accessible to all students and given DIT's multi-campus locations we provide our hour-long consultations in the north and south side campuses during the academic calendar.

Through its collaboration with the LITTC, INEW and the Writing Centre at Maynooth University, the AWC has facilitated a number of workshops with national and international experts on salient aspects of academic writing for staff. This is a valuable activity as it affords academics the opportunity to share ideas on best practice on a range of issues such as providing feedback on students' written assignments, embedding writing activities in their modules and programmes, as well as nurturing and promoting an engagement with writing as a core activity in third-level education. The AWC is keen to establish links with lecturing staff and to respond to lecturers' requests to organise specialised bespoke activities to address the specific academic writing needs of their students. This line of activity, Writing in the Disciplines, represents a new area of activity of the AWC.

Currently, the AWC employs a coordinator on a half-time basis and academic writing tutors. The AWC co-ordinator is charged with managing all the administrative, day-to-day running of the Centre as well as developing the Centre and its future activities. Tutors are peer academic writers, engaged in PhD research and often involved in other academic activities such as lecturing or tutoring in other student service units in DIT or other HEI. They undergo specialist tutor training sessions in advance of meeting students in one-to-one sessions. They also participate in professional development courses and workshops as they arise. This ongoing training and the tutors' own experience as academic writers allow them to manage the interaction with students with professionalism and sensitivity towards students' writing concerns.

#### APPROACH/MODEL TO TUTORING ADOPTED IN THE WRITING CENTRE

At the AWC, we aspire to promote learning about writing. We do this by being student-centred, by encouraging students to become reflective about writing and by using a collaborative approach to the interaction between the tutor and the student. Our tutoring approach recognises that the learner's initiative to seek support with their writing places them as the main agent in the learning process. Our tutoring style rests on three fundamental pillars that, in our view, further empower students to engage and complete the writing task. Student-centred learning, viewing writing as a process, and a collaborative approach between tutor and student are the

fundamental principles that inform the practical and pedagogical approach to tutoring at the AWC.

Student-centred learning, as explored by North (1984), is to start where the student is and not where he/she should be. At the AWC, a student-centred approach to learning is made possible by the individualised attention students get at the one-to-one consultations. Tutors can address the students' specific concerns and respond to their queries at whatever stage of the writing process they are at. As North (1984) points out, it is the talk that goes on at the writing Centre that is meaningful, it is the dialogue, the conversation with the student, that has the potential to provide the student with new insights about the nature of the writing task and their approach to writing.

North's (1984) perspective on viewing writing as a process is further complemented by Ryan and Zimmerelli's assertion that: "writing is a process of discovery – of exploring, testing, and refining ideas, then figuring out the most effective way to communicate those ideas to an audience" (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2010: 7). At the AWC, we encourage students to view writing as a process, as an iterative journey that encompasses stages that feed backwards and forwards to develop and refine the ideas and arguments explored in the written assignment. The concept of writing as a process encourages students to view writing as a competence that can be acquired and learnt over time by becoming reflective about their approaches to writing. This reflective approach allows for ideas and concepts on the topic to emerge and mature,

for considerations on issues of audience, purpose and genre to be refined and for corrections and improvements on style, lexical and grammatical accuracy to be implemented.

Finally, the University of Sydney defines collaborative learning as an umbrella term that includes various approaches in education that involve joint intellectual effort by students or by students and teachers. This joint intellectual effort is the core of the interaction style between tutor and student and it is further complemented by a non-directive/non-instructional approach explored by North (1984). At the AWC, we adopt collaboration and non-directiveness as central to the pedagogical approach to the interaction with the student. We believe that this type of intervention acknowledges the student as the author and discipline expert and also shows due observance to assessment and evaluation procedures.

Collaboration between tutor and student is a multifaceted process that assists the student in a variety of ways: understanding the nature of the task, constructing and deconstructing the written assignment brief, articulating ideas, assigning meaning to the topic in hand, and unveiling misconceptions and expectations about the written task. Collaboration is a two-way process in the interaction between tutor and student. The tutor's expertise facilitates the students' writing journey by asking students probing and relevant questions but also by allowing students time to articulate ideas on the topic or voice their own concerns.

#### HOW WE WORK WITH STUDENTS IN OUR WRITING CENTRE

Ryan and Zimmerelli (2010) emphasise the importance of making writing centres a welcoming and friendly space. At the AWC, we recognise that, by and large, students may feel intimidated or anxious about seeking support. To counter this, we adopt a friendly, non-judgemental approach to ensure that students feel at ease in discussing their writing concerns. The tutor opens the session by welcoming the student and establishing the nature of his/her concern and agreeing on what aspect of writing to concentrate on during the session. The tutor asks a number of 'situational questions': the programme/year of study, the title of the assignment, the stage they are at in completing the assignment. Ryan and Zimmerelli explain that this initial conversation allows tutors "to establish a comfortable acquaintance but also to gather information and assess the writer's needs" (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2010:19). This interaction, therefore, affords the tutor the invaluable opportunity to put the student at ease, to praise and acknowledge the student's progress, and to assist the student in 'unpacking' the written assignment brief, in articulating their ideas about the topic, about the structure and the format of the written assignment. It focuses the student's attention on the nature, content, breath and depth of the written assignment.

Ryan and Zimmerelli's (2010) original framework of key strategies to be used in the one-to-one consultations at the writing centre provides a useful resource to our tutors. Strategies such as active

listening, reacting as a reader by asking additional information, requesting clarification, refocusing and prompting fit in well with a non-directive collaborative approach to supporting students. These strategies are equally useful at the various stages of the writing process: generating ideas, drafting and editing. While tutors may or may not be experts in the student's discipline area, this is not an impediment to a fruitful interaction and helpful support to students. Tutors are engaged listeners and effective communicators, and their expertise resides in their ability to connect and respond to students' concerns and self-doubts about their writing by providing clear strategies to deal with specific matters.

On occasions, we find it necessary to provide students with the necessary 'prompts' or 'scaffolding' to allow them to move onto the next stage in their writing. This may be done by exploring academic writing resources available online, reading samples of work from their discipline area, offering prompts on how to plan or on how to edit. While this type of intervention is a departure from North's (1984) non-directive approach, it echoes a commitment for the need for flexibility in the approach taken at the writing centre explored by Hawthorn (1999). Hawthorn (1999) citing Clark (1996) argues in favour of helping students in a more direct manner and with specific issues relating to editing and proofreading. While we do not engage in proofreading or editing per se, we do help students to identify frequent grammatical errors or issues with structuring sentences, paragraphs or sections.

#### CONTRIBUTORS' REFLECTIONS – INSPIRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

The Academic Writing Centre is a new student support service in DIT and, while support with academic writing is our specific remit, we believe our role extends to include a positive student experience and an aid to a successful transition to third level education. We firmly believe that our support can be instrumental in helping students manage the challenges of academic work and that learning about writing is something that students will carry beyond their years in college into their future professional life.

The development of the AWC owes much to the generous support of the academic writing community in DIT, in Ireland, and internationally. DIT's Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre, well established writing centres together with academic writing networks such as INEW and European associations such as EATAW, EWCA and WDHE provide a sound framework for the exploration and implementation of models of best practice on pedagogical and ethical grounds in the writing centre. Their willingness to collaborate and share their expertise has been invaluable to the nascent AWC. Good lessons have been learnt about the importance of using a student-centred, collaborative approach at our one-to-one consultations, about the connection between learning to write and developing critical thinking skills, and about how focusing on developing students' writing competence is a door to supporting students succeed in college.

As the Academic Writing Centre develops into a clearly defined unit, we aspire to be a model of good practice in student support and to further develop our engagement with Faculty. The AWC aspires to be an agile and robust centre responsive to the needs of students and staff. We aim to become the beacon and shine a light on the importance of competence in writing as a key graduate attribute. With the necessary resources and strategic collaboration, the AWC has the potential to support Faculty's own writing development and also new initiatives to embed writing at modular and programme level. Students will always remain the primary focus of our work and in order to be responsive to the changing needs of the student body the AWC may need to reconsider its initial remit and perhaps expand it to include additional supports and activities to specific groups, namely, mature and international students. Regardless of changes or challenges ahead, the AWC remains committed to the development and support of a writing community in DIT.

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## Eastern Kentucky University Contributors

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and Russell Carpenter

### How Do You Know? A Studio-Based Approach to Metacognitive Practice

#### Introduction

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) is a regional comprehensive higher education institution of over 16,000 students located in Richmond, Kentucky, United States. The Noel Studio for Academic Creativity (Noel Studio), where we work, is located in the historic Crabbe Library at the center of the University's campus. This program serves as the intellectual and physical hub for academic initiatives across campus, including writing resources and feedback. As its mission states, the Noel Studio programs exist to create innovative support for communication, research, and teaching and learning initiatives that enhance deep learning at EKU. The Noel Studio leads the EKU community, its service region, and the nation as a transformative physical and virtual hub for innovation in pedagogy, critical and creative thinking, research, and communication.

The program values self-efficacy, faculty and students as co-facilitators of learning, high-impact practice, and intentionality (Mission and Vision).

The Noel Studio features over 60 highly trained student staff members, called consultants. Consultants serve many different roles in the program, including academic consultant, desk consultant, course-embedded consultant, media consultant, graduate consultant, research assistant, and DEEP (Developing Excellence in Eastern's Professors) graduate assistant to support faculty development online systems. Administrative positions include an Associate Director of Programs and Outreach; Assistant Director, Writing and Communication Programs; Technology Coordinator; Co-Directors of Teaching & Learning; and Administrative Assistant. The program prides itself on unparalleled student leadership and offers numerous student-leader positions such as public relations and social media, professional development, spaces and services, and assessment.

The program prioritizes deep learning--learning that is visible, intentional, and transferable--in the thinking and composing processes, especially during consultations and workshops, complementary program initiatives that support effective writing-focused teaching and learning. To enhance deep learning, however, the program employs approaches that promote metacognition among faculty and students.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE WRITING CENTRE

The Noel Studio encompasses approximately 10,000 square feet in the middle of the Crabbe Library. The space features two floors. Rooms within the space include the Greenhouse, which is an open, flexible area in the middle of the facility. The space also includes the most popular teaching environment on campus: the Discovery Classroom, which provides laptops for students and visualization technologies (About the Space).

What can students do in the Noel Studio?

The space facilitates:

- *independent, small-group invention and writing activities that take place with a highly trained consultant;*
- *collaborative brainstorming, drafting, or honing projects in an interactive, high-energy environment;*
- *experimentation with multiple high- and low-tech spaces to accommodate diverse learning styles, communication projects, and collaborative groups*
- *creative learning processes through the use of mobile furniture to help students create their own ideal environments for effective communication.*

Experience the Noel Studio virtual tour of spaces located at <http://studio.eku.edu/about-noel-studio>.

The Noel Studio conducts over 6,000 one-on-one and small-group consultations per year focused on writing, communication, design, and research and approximately 250 workshops in collaboration with faculty for classes of students. Faculty have access to active-learning toolkits (Collaborate and Engage with the Noel Studio) for each workshop that will allow them to facilitate similar sessions in their own classrooms for their students. In addition, the program coordinates faculty development initiatives such as the popular Teaching & Learning Innovation (TLI) series, the Teaching & Learning Dialogues series, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and the Provost's Professional Development Speaker series. The integrated initiatives in the program reach both students and faculty while connecting teaching, learning, and research for all members of the campus community. It is a unique space where it is common to see consultants, students, and faculty working side-by-side with one another.

#### APPROACH/MODEL TO TUTORING ADOPTED IN THE WRITING CENTRE

Metacognition is widely known as “thinking about one’s own thinking.” Moreover, as Saundra Y. McGuire explains, “When students employ metacognition, they become consciously aware of themselves as problem solvers, which enables them to actively seek solutions to any problems they may encounter, rather than relying on others to tell them what to do or answer their questions” (16).

Metacognitive initiatives can be found in all aspects of the Noel Studio’s mission and vision as well as the pedagogy promoted by the staff. The Noel Studio provides services and resources for both students and staff in order to model tutoring strategies as well as metacognitive pedagogy. Through these methods, the program aims to promote self-efficacy among learners through high-impact practice, creative thinking, intentionality, and facilitation of deep learning.

These methods are put into practice in several related ways. First, the program promotes creative thinking through the Noel Studio Orientation, an approach to introduce students to the spaces and resources. Professors schedule orientations for their classes to meet in the Noel Studio during regular class time. Once in the space, consultants give a brief presentation about the Noel Studio program and lead the students throughout the spaces, modeling the educational resources available. Consultants promote areas for group and independent writing and communication (reservable Presentation and Breakout spaces); orientation facilitators also model electronic resources such as the Media Wall—a visual space with large, flat-screen monitors—and Invention Space, which includes a large interactive dry-erase board, all of which enhance collaborative and creative learning. Throughout the orientation, students and faculty are free to explore the spaces and try out the educational resources available while also envisioning ways in which these resources might be of use during their writing process. During this time, students have opportunities for creative

thinking as they apply their subjects of study and learning styles to the tools at hand.

Along with orientations, the Noel Studio models its tutoring strategies by offering writing, communication-design, research, and visual communication workshops for faculty who wish to promote self-efficacy and intentionality among their students. These workshops help students to employ metacognition while learning in the space. For example, the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) workshop serves as an approach that facilitates high-impact research practice. With a consultant serving as facilitator, students brainstorm research questions focused on a specific topic, select the questions most pertinent to their topic, and rewrite any closed questions as open questions. The workshop promotes intentionality among the students by modeling the importance of process over product. Faculty also benefit from the Noel Studio collaboration by having complete access to the active-learning toolkits based on these workshops (Collaborate and Engage with the Noel Studio). These active-learning toolkits include the necessary materials for faculty to integrate studio pedagogy within their own classrooms.

To further promote both self-efficacy and intentionality among students, the Noel Studio offers students a wide variety of resources centralized to the learning process for use in individual and small-group consultations along with interactive workshops. Student handouts, for example, are located in the Noel Studio Greenhouse as well as online (Handouts and Resources). These

handouts outline processes for writing, annotating, researching, outlining, and brainstorming, all emphasizing the importance of process over product with helpful devices such as step-by-step guidelines, mnemonic devices, and graphics to ensure deeper learning.

#### HOW WE WORK WITH STUDENTS IN OUR WRITING CENTRE

The Noel Studio models the writing and learning process for students in a collaborative, creative, and engaging environment. These elements together deepen the learning experience.

The Noel Studio's most active student-facing program is the one-on-one or small-group consultation. During the consultation, a student works with a consultant: a peer undergraduate or graduate student highly-trained in assisting with all stages of a writing or communication process--from brainstorming topics to refining a final project. Each consultation takes place for 30 to 60 minutes.

At the beginning of each consultation, the student and consultant agree on a focus. This activity encourages metacognitive thought processes and requires students to identify their academic problems and work to become reflective and independent thinkers and writers. Instead of addressing all issues of a project at one time, the goal-setting process within the consultation allows students to develop abilities and confidence in writing by facilitating continual growth.

While the focus within consultations is typically on the issues identified by students, the Noel Studio refers to issues as higher-order (issues that affect the project as a whole) and lower-order concerns (issues that affect the project at the local or sentence-level) to more effectively help student in areas relating to deep learning. While a student might struggle with grammar, the primary focus within the consultation is on ensuring the clarity of student ideas and focus. For example, if a student arrived for a consultation with a rhetorical analysis and had equal trouble with grammatical issues and identifying instances of logos, pathos, and ethos, consultants would focus on the latter issue as it was necessary to the overall communication of ideas whereas grammar can be improved at a later stage of polishing.

The Noel Studio encourages other metacognitive strategies within consultations to extend the value of this learning experience beyond the physical space. Students often come to the space because they have questions about critical reading and comprehension. In such cases, consultants model annotation strategies while emphasizing their importance. Within consultations, consultants often "think aloud," reading the text, commenting on it out loud, and encouraging students to explore the process on their own. Another common way in which consultants and students use metacognitive strategies to visualize thought processes is through mindmapping--visual and interactive brainstorming on dry-erase boards or butcher paper. The broad initial topic is written first, then given spokes which extend to different subtopics. In creating a

mindmap, students can see all of their ideas on a topic to narrow down or open up a specific concept for a project.

The Noel Studio creates a metacognitive learning environment. While students envision, create, and reflect on rhetorically compelling projects, consultants primarily emphasize the process of learning and communicating, meaning that skills modeled during the consultation can be used beyond the specific assignment. Consultations are typically discussion-based and collaborative rather than didactic. As such, consultants and students are co-facilitators of learning. Consultants share knowledge and abilities while asking questions to serve and empower students, and students actively engage within the consultation to grow as learners.

#### CONTRIBUTOR'S REFLECTIONS - INSPIRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

Several questions continue to prompt reflection in the Noel Studio: Are we encouraging deep-learning experiences that enhance students' writing processes? How might we continue the development of metacognitive practices so that students become more independent learners? These questions also serve to inspire future aspirations.

EKU--where we are fortunate enough to teach and learn--has historically focused on delivering high-quality educational experiences for students and development opportunities for faculty. These efforts have allowed the University to progress and earn respect among its peers as a place that values

its students and provides unique opportunities to engage in high-impact practices (American Association of Colleges & Universities) such as undergraduate research.

While placing value on learning as an academic institution is commendable, our institution's collective efforts acknowledge the critical importance of intentional learning for students, especially in the writing, communication, and research process. These efforts are not one-sided, simply channeled from faculty to student. The institution is in the early stages of designing a collective effort--centered on the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity in the heart of the University's highly active Crabbe Library--to implement intentional learning experiences for students through the use of metacognitive strategies.

Through a combination of consultations, spaces, and resources, the Noel Studio facilitates deep learning--learning that is transferable across academic contexts and situations--in students. Moving forward, though, our program will continue to investigate the relationship between metacognition and related studio-enhanced programming efforts.

Students will remain as the motivation for this metacognitive model. Moreover, the Noel Studio will continue to build on these metacognition strategies to promote a program design that allows students and faculty to serve as co-facilitators in the learning process. Within this space and program design, students spend a great deal of time thinking,

learning, writing, and designing communication within spaces that reflect their optimal approach to these activities. These interactions will continue to provide new research and development opportunities for the program.

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## St Mary's University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Matthew Martin

#### Introduction

St Mary's University College was the first higher education institution in Ireland and the UK to provide a full-time, undergraduate, peer-tutoring-based writing centre for all of its students. Although we are a college of the much larger Queen's University, Belfast, we maintain the distinctive environment and ethos of a small, specialist Catholic institution. Across both of our degree programmes (one in teacher education – with the option to learn through Irish as well as English – and one in the Liberal Arts), we pursue what we describe in our mission statement as 'the development of the whole person in a Christian, values-sensitive environment in preparation for a lifetime of learning'. Because of that institutional commitment to 'the whole person', the writing centre in St Mary's has always received the enthusiastic support of our senior management due precisely to our holistic pedagogical approach. Both tutors and tutees are brought into an educational environment in our writing centre where the individual's particular strengths and challenges inform the entire educational exchange.

In the spring of 2002, the St Mary's Writing Centre began training peer tutors and accepting tutee appointments. In 2005 the centre received a £250,000 grant and was designated a 'Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning' (CETL) by the Northern Ireland Department of Employment and Learning. This money enabled us to begin disseminating our best practice to other institutions and to learn from other programmes devoted to student writing support elsewhere. We helped to set up and to support writing programmes at a range of higher education institutions throughout England and Ireland and, consequently, it could be said that the CETL grant money (both to our centre and to other writing programmes) contributed greatly to furthering the thriving conversations that are taking place today around Britain and Ireland on the subject of supporting student writing in higher education.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE WRITING CENTRE

The St Mary's Writing Centre is based in what used to be a recording studio and audio-visual production centre in the college and, consequently, it provides students with a lovely, acoustically-treated space that lends itself well to quiet conversation and contemplation. In addition, Jonathan Worley, Writing Centre Director, has a full view of what's happening in the tutoring area and in the student tutor office space thanks to the glass windows of former control booths and studio spaces. Rather than being a perch from which to keep a close eye on things, this arrangement gives everyone the relaxed confidence that help and support is nearby

if necessary, but for the most part the centre runs strictly under the steam of the students themselves. This fact was made most apparent once in the early days of the centre when Jonathan was off ill and he rang into the college to ask that the rooms all be unlocked first thing in the morning. About an hour after they were unlocked, we were amazed to see the rooms fill up with tutors and tutees – all abuzz with talk of writing – and the corridor outside filled with students making appointments for future meetings. The centre was running itself! We felt then that we had arrived at the change of culture around academic writing that we were aiming for. It was no longer seen as strictly a form of individualised assessment, but as a learning opportunity that could be best exploited within an informed, student-led community of practice. While the administration and peer tutor recruitment and training is still firmly led by Jonathan Worley, the actual life and practice of the writing centre is very much a student-led phenomenon.

#### APPROACH/MODEL TO TUTORING ADOPTED IN THE WRITING CENTRE

The St Mary's Writing Centre uses a peer-tutoring-based format for supporting student writers across all our disciplines and degree programmes. Inspired particularly by work we came into contact with at Merrimack College in Massachusetts, our model developed as a programme which moved us further and further away from generic writing skills support towards greater and greater discipline-specific support. We now recruit peer

tutors directly from the different disciplines within the college (including Irish-medium programmes), and begin their training by giving them work to do in researching and reflecting upon the writing requirements of their own field. This work ranges from documenting the specific formal requirements within the field (Which style sheet do they follow?, What genres of writing do they work with most often?, In what sorts of journals do they publish in order to stay connected with one another?) to much deeper questions about why these formalities rule within their field. Discipline-specific questions of epistemology are pursued: What constitutes knowledge within this field? How is that knowledge interrogated and agreed upon? Why do the genres and formalities required in the field suit the types of work academics in the field undertake? The tutors interview lecturers in their department asking these sorts of questions along with learning about the challenges students face most often when learning to write within the discipline.

One of the most revealing moments of the tutor training process comes when tutors report back to one another on what they have discovered about their own disciplines. Eyes are opened when they see how different departments approach academic writing. Just as we never truly understand our own culture until we have travelled abroad, these tutors gain a great deal from these short intellectual excursions into different areas of study. Now they are no longer parroting the rules of the genre, but they are able to speak with some conviction about why those rules matter.

Tutors are trained in student-centred pedagogical approaches. The emphasis is always on making the tutee better at revising his or her own essay, as opposed to simply improving the essay itself. In pursuit of that goal, the training puts forward several key principles:

1. *The tutee remains responsible for what is in the essay.*
2. *Tutors do not 'proofread', 'correct' or 'fix' the essay. They may point out patterns of grammatical errors in parts of the essay, but they always leave it to the tutees to internalise that knowledge and to follow through on the revisions themselves.*
3. *Taking charge of a session and determining the priorities for the writer is rarely as helpful as listening to the writer's account of their struggles and building on that.*
4. *A clear paper trail is necessary if the Writing Centre is to remain successful.*
5. *If a tutee feels they were inadequately served or misled by a peer tutor, it is crucial that we have an agreed record of what took place so that we can either show the tutee where they misinterpreted what was said or explain to the tutor where they may have gone wrong.*

#### HOW WE WORK WITH STUDENTS IN OUR WRITING CENTRE

Our tutors are encouraged to lead with questions as opposed to answers. By finding out what the student feels is not working for them, tutors are often led to the comments made by past lecturers on past papers and patterns begin to emerge. Usually the tutor needn't even comment on the pattern, as by reading past comments aloud, the tutee begins to hear for her or himself what has been happening. Students are also, surprisingly, empowered simply by sitting beside their peer as they review their own work. The mere presence of another attentive mind seems to help focus theirs. Their thinking becomes clearer in the Writing Centre, as opposed to when they are alone in the recesses of the library.

The question-asking phase is crucial, and is frequently the most productive part of the session, in part because it is at this stage that the session can take surprising turns. In one case, it became apparent to a tutor that the tutee, working on an English essay, didn't know where in the library all the Shakespeare books were shelved, so the essay was set aside while the rest of the tutoring session was taken up with an individualised, guided tour of the library. This student may have missed part of induction and, if the tutor had not listened carefully, but rather had trundled ahead with stock commentary about good writing, then a crucial gap in the tutee's knowledge may have been missed.

After the question-asking, our tutors are encouraged to be on their toes and to look out for any possible pastoral issues the tutee might be dealing with.

We have discovered one central strength of our writing centre model is that we capture the student at the moment they feel most focused on the specific writing task in front of them. We are not discussing ‘good writing’ free of any context; we are looking at real tasks with real consequences. It’s rather like the moment a Frisbee is thrown for the dog to chase – in that moment of releasing the Frisbee, focus and motivation are complete and unshakeable. Because having an essay due shortly focuses the mind so completely, students absorb the writing help they receive in the centre more deeply. One potential downside to this degree of focus, we have discovered, is that the stress of an upcoming due date can also bring to the surface many other non-academic issues pressuring the student. Tears are, sometimes, the result. We have had to train our tutors to be very clear in these cases about their boundaries. Peer tutors are usually very caring, empathetic people by nature, and their instinct is to reach out and help a struggling student. Sometimes, however, they simply must direct the tutee to the professionals within the college who are trained to handle difficult emotional issues and broader problems of the student’s welfare. To blur that boundary could lead the Writing Centre into very choppy emotional and legal waters.

Basically, our peer tutors encourage students to look at their own essays with fresh eyes. Key techniques include reading aloud (the single most powerful tool when revising an essay) and reviewing a few different models of the writing process to see if the student has perhaps skipped over certain key

stages. We use a version of Don Murray’s model (Collect-Focus-Order-Draft-Clarify) so that, for example, a student may realise that their collection of information in the first instance was inadequate and has hampered every stage after. Or perhaps they have collected a great deal of information but never subjected it to the rigours of focusing – leaving the essay a wandering, exploratory draft. Peter Elbow’s two-stage model, of a creative phase followed by a critical phase, has been very empowering for students caught up in the writer’s block which results from confusing these two sorts of endeavour. And lastly we use a model developed by Matthew Martin known as ‘Focus, Depth, Significance.’ This model asks tutees to consider these concepts in sequence and to note how depth is dependent on focus, and significance is dependent on depth. Consequently, much good writing can be seen as stemming directly from the initial act of focusing – focusing arguments, focusing paragraphs, and even focusing sentences.

#### CONTRIBUTOR'S REFLECTIONS - INSPIRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

A number of other writing programmes in other institutions have been inspirational to our work. The staff of Merrimack College in Massachusetts have been particularly supportive by sharing their innovative practices with us and by connecting us to many other practitioners in writing centre work and composition studies. Future goals at St Mary’s include extending our efforts to ‘de-centre’ the centre – that is, to integrate and embed our

approach to supporting student writing in the disciplines themselves and within the curriculum so that every module becomes infused with models for redrafting with peer support. We are also presently working with schools in the community in order to help develop these approaches to student writing at a younger age. In doing this, we have been inspired and supported by Professor Richard Kent at the University of Maine, the leading specialist in schools-based writing centres. Bringing this work into schools is an exciting new link for us. One former peer tutor, who went on to teach in a primary school, commented on the significance of connecting her experience of the St Mary’s Writing Centre with her work in school, saying, ‘it highlighted for me the importance of giving children the chance to develop their metalinguistic skills and metacognitive skills so that it isn’t a matter of telling them where to put in that apostrophe, or diagnosing them as having issues with grammar rules. Through the same processes as those employed by peer tutors in St. Mary’s, children can learn the little techniques that help them to refine their written work and literacy skills in general. They can see patterns of error in their own work and have the confidence to say, “I don’t understand . . . HELP!”’ We look forward to this exciting new phase of our work.

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## University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Djuddah A.J. Leijen

### Introduction

The University of Tartu (UT) prides itself as the leading research and training institute in Estonia and belonging to the top 1.2 % of the world's best universities, according to the QS World University Rankings 2018. Given the turbulent history of the university, this pride does not come as a surprise.

To understand the development of the Centre for Academic Writing and Communication, UT's writing centre, a short introduction to the historic development of the UT is necessary. The history of the University of Tartu begins in 1632 when the university was founded and modelled after Uppsala University, Sweden, during the time of Swedish rule. In the 18th Century, Swedish rule was taken over by Russian rule, but during that time the UT was able to prosper. The adopted language was German. After the first World War, Estonia gained its independence and established their national university with Estonian as the language of instruction. With the coming of the second World War, the UT transitioned back and forth

between the Soviet Union, German occupation, and back again to the rule of the Soviet Union. Regrettably, the Soviet Occupation crippled the status and reputation of the University. Traditional curricula, such as theology, were closed; however, some scientists were able to establish scientific schools of thought in linguistics and semiotics (for example, Yuri Lotman and the School of Structural Semiotics). In 1989, Estonia regained their independence and the national University was reinstalled. The period between 1989 and 1992 saw a re-establishment of academic studies and old traditions.

In 2008, a small group of enthusiasts sought to develop a centre for academic writing and communication to support the growing needs of further structural and educational changes, and to highlight a better understanding of writing as a means of communication and evaluating student learning.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE WRITING CENTRE

The centre for academic writing and communication (AVOK: Akadeemilise Väljendusoskuse Keskus) was established in 2008 in the Language Centre of the University of Tartu. It was the first centre to be established in the Baltic region and was primarily modelled after North American style writing centres. As the centre was primarily started by two enthusiasts, an underscored plan had to be put into place to obtain a small development fund and gain a wider knowledge base justifying the need of such a centre. Additionally, it would also determine

how the centre should be structured. The first task of the centre was to develop a university wide questionnaire in Estonian and English, addressing the current state of writing at the University of Tartu from the perspective of third year Bachelor's students, Master's students, and PhD students, and from the perspective of academics across the university. The survey addressed issues related to the type of writing, support of writing, needs, location and activities of a writing centre, academic staff requirements, and language in general.

As no survey of this type had been conducted before, no assumptions could be made about what the general consensus about writing was. The survey was sent out through the general lists and 1015 students and close to 200 academics responded. The main results of the survey provided very little surprises, except that large discrepancies were found between the perception of students and academics regarding the quality of writing (Leijen, Jürine & Trigel, 2015). In addition, students noted the lack of support available when they encountered problems with writing. The general response being, "I will try the best I can to improve my skills". The survey itself would lay the foundation of the model and approach of AVOK for the next five years.

At present, the writing centre operates without any structural financial support. The staff that work for the writing centre have either a contract as a lecturer in another department (e.g. English language department) or they have a number of work hours allocated to the centre. All the students who are involved with the writing centre work as volunteers.

### APPROACH/MODEL TO TUTORING ADOPTED IN THE WRITING CENTRE

The results of the survey clearly indicated that writing support was needed and that this support should come within the disciplines. As such, modelling writing according to WAC/ WID principles seemed to be the most logical step. In addition, the survey also clearly brought to the forefront that those who needed support were primarily students who were writing in a language which did not correspond to their native language. In this case, it was both for Russian speaking Estonian students and for international students attending international (English speaking) programmes. Consequently, challenges associated with second/other language skills emerged more conspicuously than awareness around academic writing proficiency.

The writing centre initiative, coming from the Language Centre, generally reflected this perception, and, as we see across the European continent, often writing centres grow out of the expertise found in Language Centres, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Also, within the context of the University of Tartu, expertise in writing academic English was found at the Language Centre in that a handful of elective courses as this nature were taught to students of the university.

Given the lack the expertise available, and the lack of funding, a bottom-up approach was chosen to build the centre. This meant working on four key strategic aspects:

1. *to develop and teach more specific courses integrating the writing process as the core competence, and not language (with a long term goal of nestling these courses across the curricula and within the discipline);*
2. *to train students from different disciplines to become writing consultants and offer individual consultation to students;*
3. *to increase visibility of the writing centre by writing and promoting the writing centre through different media outlets and public notice boards;*
4. *to publish a paper about writing at the University of Tartu in English and in Estonian.*

The main aim of the writing courses was to introduce an alternative way of teaching writing. The survey indicated that the majority of writing was evaluated at the end of the course and students were rarely able to submit and receive feedback on drafts. Writing was product oriented and not process driven. The first process based courses were for PhD candidates where a Swalian (1990) genre based approach to teaching journal article writing was introduced. A few courses for BA and MA students followed. Rather than having these courses positioned in their disciplines, they were still labelled as EAP writing courses, i.e. writing in English for Chemists; academic writing in English. In addition, a training course for writing consultants

was set up, primarily to teach the concept of tutoring, to educate students about the process of writing, and to help students to identify how working as writing tutors could have personal as well as institutional benefits.

As part of increasing visibility, and aside from the recruitment of writing consultants, we splashed our posters around the campus, published our survey results and handbooks on writing, and we organised writing workshops. These efforts ensured that students became aware of our work and supported our bottom-up approach of making ourselves a valuable asset in the structure of the university.

#### HOW WE WORK WITH STUDENTS IN OUR WRITING CENTRE

Since our initial efforts, we have managed to install a strong foundation for peer consultants, who are recruited from the courses that the centre teaches. Students who are interested in becoming a volunteer peer consultant follow our bi-annual training course for writing consultants, or, in the case the course does not fit their schedule, follow an individual training trajectory.

As the writing centre does not have funding to cover the costs of our peer consultants, all consultants work as volunteers. This also means that as a centre, we have to provide students with incentives to be motivated to work as volunteers. Initially our thought was that it would be difficult to attract students, but as it turned out, students (specifically PhD candidates) are interested in developing their

own skills as consultants and are convinced about the 'to give is better than to receive' concept. This concept is very much promoted through the courses students take.

The added advantage of working with student volunteers is that we seem to attract those students who have a 'relationship' with writing. For some of them this is a very positive relationship (e.g. they like writing and wish to know more or do more with writing), or they have a negative relationship with writing. One consultant reported that she used to love writing when she was in high school. She would keep a diary, write poetry and short stories. Once she arrived at university, this love was taken away from her by the writing assignments she received or did not receive in her classes. Working as a consultant has given her back some of the love she lost and is able to share her personal experience with others.

Another added advantage of working with volunteers is that we have managed to create a very friendly group of consultants, who have all chosen to support the writing cause. They have a 'base' to visit when they just want to talk about their own writing or when they just wish to 'hang-out'. All our consultants are given a white mug which they can personalise with their name or artwork and there is always coffee, tea and cookies available. As such, the writing centre space has become the writing hub we have set out to create.

The only downside of working with volunteers is that we have to be very sensitive to their schedule and their needs. As a result, when we receive requests for consultations, we generally tend to match the needs and discipline of the student with a consultant. We approach the consultant to see whether he or she is able to have a consultation with this student. If they have time, we ask the consultant to contact the student directly to discuss the issue at hand and find a suitable time for the consultation. If the consultant is unable to meet with a student, we approach another consultant with the same request. We try to find different types of incentives, in the form of study credit points, letters of recognition and recommendation, smaller projects, etc., to reward the work our consultants voluntarily provide to others. More often than not, the feedback consultants receive (which is largely incredibly positive) is a reward in itself and keeps our consultants motivated.

#### CONTRIBUTOR'S REFLECTIONS - INSPIRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

Looking back at the development of AVOK and the impact we have on students and writing as a whole, we have noticed much of the description concerns the centre itself and not so much on the content of the centre and how our work impacts on the institution, departments, and students. This is perhaps a result of the bottom-up approach we have taken. Our main concern has always been in making our cause visible and developing our services based on the needs of the students. As

such, peer consultants have formed the heart of our activities, followed by workshops that have grown out of the needs to serve students during times when they require the most support e.g. in the final two months when students have to write their thesis.

We have developed writing boot camps, have joined the library nights, and advertised around campus to let students know that we are here to help. Over the years all these interventions have become part of the university, recognised by students and departments. It also meant that the growth we experienced needed to be supported by more university staff, through a portion of their workload. This, however, turned out to be the weakest link when developing the centre using a grassroots approach.

Currently, the writing centre is in jeopardy. Due to the lack of funding, the centre is unable to hire a person who would be able to manage the daily running of the centre, which, after years of success, needs to be co-ordinated; this involves leading the student consultants, running of the workshops, the administration of our activities, communication with departments and stakeholders etc. Without such a person, there is no writing centre. In hindsight developing the centre bottom up might not have been the best approach. The success of the writing centre has revealed the problems of writing at University of Tartu, which John Harbord (2011) reported on in his paper 'Writing in Central and Eastern Europe: Stakeholders and Directions in Initiating Change'. The University of Tartu lacks a clear writing programme. Writing has not yet become an integral part of learning and preparing

students for writing at university does not start at secondary school levels.

For any future writing centre initiative to survive, increasing the visibility of a writing programme is needed in order to sustain the activities of the writing centre. Only through a programme would the use of peer consultants make sense. Our future aspirations are to concentrate on these efforts and approach our cause structurally and systematically in order to gain both understanding and funding.

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**Íde O'Sullivan** is a Senior Educational Developer at the Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Limerick, where she leads Ireland's first Regional Writing Centre. Since 2007, Íde has lead the design, delivery and evaluation of writing-support interventions at UL, grounding writing centre initiatives in good practice and sound theory. Íde also works with faculty on the development of their professional writing for publication. Íde is a founding member and co-chair of INEW. Her current research focuses on adapting academic writing development to particular national contexts and on enhancing peer tutoring in academic writing. Other areas of interest include corpus linguistics, second language acquisition research and the development of new literacies.

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