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## Peering Into the Writing Center: Information Literacy as Collaborative Conversation

Janelle M. Zauha

Montana State University, [jzauha@montana.edu](mailto:jzauha@montana.edu)

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# PEERING INTO THE WRITING CENTER

Information literacy as a collaborative conversation

Janelle Zauha  
*Montana State University, Bozeman*

This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at [ragains@unr.edu](mailto:ragains@unr.edu), or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at [editors@comminfolit.org](mailto:editors@comminfolit.org).

What is your library's relationship with peer tutoring services on campus? Peaceful co-existence, détente, or active collaboration? Armies of tutors employed through student services may routinely use your library as a convenient place to meet but have no actual knowledge of your research services, let alone the information literacy objectives of your instruction program. Without making connections with tutoring services you may be missing an important opportunity to broaden the reach of information literacy across the curriculum. As models for peer assisted learning – whether known as tutoring, coaching, mentoring, counseling, or by some other term – proliferate in the academy (Bodemer, in press), it is easier and more important than ever for libraries to collaborate with these programs to ensure that information literacy instruction is included wherever possible.

There are many ways to experiment with incorporating information literacy into peer-based learning programs on campus. At the most ambitious level, a library might implement its own program to hire, train, and mentor students to serve as peer research guides at a library service point and/or as teachers of beginning level research sessions in the classroom. While such library-led programs are time-consuming, those that are well-planned and monitored are shown to extend the reach of the library's instruction agenda (Bodemer, in press). A less intensive option for integrating student tutors into our information literacy agenda while extending impact is for the library to collaborate with peer tutoring programs already in place on campus, some of which are focused on specific populations such as student athletes (Davidson and Peyton, 2007).

One peer tutoring program with tremendous potential may be as close as your own

library commons: the writing center. It is not unusual today to find academic libraries with writing centers or satellites located within their learning commons. Often this seems to be primarily a co-location model (Todorinova, 2010). Visible co-location is not a bad thing, of course, but is it sufficient? Close proximity of research and writing services gives us each more visibility. It is convenient for students, facilitating easy referral from librarian to tutor and back. It makes available to the writer and tutor an information and technology-rich environment. A common roof tacitly signals that these services share certain beliefs and goals; for example, that both research and writing are processes helped by designated experts or guides.

When research and writing services are located near each other but are kept entirely separate, however, the signal is also given that both librarians and tutors feel these processes can and should be carried on in separate spaces, that it is as normal for students to move smoothly from the task of research and on to writing as if stepping between two rooms of the house, closing doors as they go. In fact, this visible separation can be tremendously misleading and even damaging, denying the nonlinear and interactive natures of both processes. In "Libraries and Writing centers in collaboration: A Basis in theory," Elmborg (2005) describes the centrality of process to both disciplines and claims that, "[t]he recursiveness in the research/writing process is related at least in part to the recurring interplay between writing and information. By segregating the research process from the writing process, we have obscured this fact and thereby impoverished both ..." (p. 11). Seen this way, so much more than proximal service could and should be occurring between research and writing centers.

Entering into conversation with the writing center, moving beyond a landlord/tenant relationship, is the first step. Understanding our common goals, characteristics, and challenges is essential in order to progress from co-existence to meaningful collaboration that can impact peer assisted learning. Designating a liaison from the library to the writing center to begin this conversation is necessary, especially if that liaison is prepared to explore the discourse of the “other field” with an open mind. One starting point in the literature is *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration* (Elmborg et al., 2005), a book that gives voice to practitioners from both fields in a collection of collaboratively written chapters posing compelling reasons for close ties between writing centers and libraries as well as pragmatic options for establishing those ties. Though nearly 10 years old, *Centers for Learning* is completely relevant today. Exploring the literature of composition studies, rhetoric, and writing centers in databases such as the *MLAIB*, *CompPile*, and *ERIC* will yield many more articles and highlight key publications in the discipline. Articles in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, for instance, give insight into issues and processes in the field, and often address topics specific to library collaboration, pointing out shared issues (Nadeau et al., 2000), bridges to be built (Elmborg, 2006), the need for breaking down boundaries (Macauley, 2007), and tutor mentoring processes that make the

information literacy link between writing and research (White Gamtso et al., 2013).

In the library science literature, the review article “Working together: Library and writing center collaboration” provides a good overview of a range of reported collaborations (Ferer, 2012). Some of the most interesting examples include extensive projects in which the writing center and the library act as equal partners to mentor tutors, deliver information literacy instruction through programs outside regular classroom interactions, create tutorials, share student tutors and other personnel, cross train, and promote common goals across campus. These examples emphasize

TAKE SOME TIME TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER. PLAN AN INITIAL EVENT THAT INCLUDES CASUAL INTERMINGLING OF LIBRARIANS, TUTORS, AND WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATORS WITH A COMMON GOAL OF HELPING STUDENTS.

the need for institutional support at all levels, careful planning, and extensive conversation to establish mutual understanding necessary for true partnerships, as well as adequate funding and the time to focus.

The danger of all this reading is that the liaison will be overwhelmed and not know where to begin. Finding the resources to establish a meaningful collaboration with your writing center, whether you occupy the same building or not, should be centered on local needs, practices, and creative serendipity. While impressive and inspiring, all the examples that Ferer (2012) cites present a pretty daunting list of prerequisites for success. Meaningful collaboration can grow from small experiments that move incrementally

beyond the routine student referrals that libraries and writing centers make to each others' services. Regardless of whether your library has the good fortune of housing the writing center or some portion of its services in the library, there are ways that you can begin collaborating without creating an extensive plan from the outset.

Take some time to get to know each other. Plan an initial event that includes casual intermingling of librarians, tutors, and writing center administrators with a common goal of helping students. The Montana State University Writing Center and the Montana State University Library have been experimenting for the past year with a research and writing clinic called "WriteNight." For two hours one or two evenings a semester, several librarians congregate in the library commons with about a dozen tutors and several writing center administrators to help students with all stages of their writing, from brainstorming to citations, including researching. We are not entirely sure yet what to make of this event but for the near future we plan to continue it, observing, assessing, and refining it to help identify best practices for working together. From my point of view, WriteNight has proven useful for the casual conversation opportunities it offers, the equal footing it provides for both writing center and library as we each bring our different areas of expertise and concern to the table in common service of our students. It makes logical use of the learning commons in the library, "a space designed to provide a holistic, interactive, collaborative learning environment" (Barbour et al., 2009), conducive to the conversations required in peer learning activities. Through WriteNight I have learned much more about our tutors and how they work, and I am starting to think more creatively about my own work.

After a recent WriteNight event, the tutors were asked to reflect on their experience. One tutor wrote a several page essay that uncovered some amazing benefits that I certainly had not expected as outcomes of the evening. Perhaps the most interesting to me was this tutor's observation of a community of writers that was created spontaneously that evening. She recalled a group of business majors who, with the initial assistance of the tutors, gathered at a table and then became a writing group helping and collaborating with each other beyond the guidance of the tutors. She also reflected on the experience of working with an online student during the event, a session she shared with two librarians: "Although I did most of the talking, I was accompanied by two of the librarians, which made for another advantage. Having different viewpoints on the same problem enabled us to give better advice to the student without making him feel ganged up on" (Schwaller, 2013).

This tutor's reflection also reminds me of the ways I would like my own work with students to change especially with regard to information literacy. As the world of reference/research librarianship shifts to meet changing student needs and incorporates new technologies and resources, I want to move my practice from one that prioritizes providing answers and teaching information literacy, toward conversation as a primary mode of advancing learning. Elmborg points out that "[c]onversation is at the heart of the learning community, and conversation is at the heart of the process model of instruction, as well" (Elmborg et al. 2005, p. 12). I want to learn from the writing center and its tutors how to shift the work of research librarians away from the fortress of the desk, how to move it out of the kingdom of the perfect answer into a conversation

model that is more dynamic, approachable, student-centered.

Without the advantage of this WriteNight experience, without exploring current practices in writing center pedagogy or having conversations with writing center administrators and tutors, I might have settled for what I would call my library's traditional approach to working with peer assisted learning groups on campus. Under this traditional approach, in order to ensure that information literacy be understood and incorporated into the Writing Center's tutoring program, I would have simply tried to teach tutors through lecture and demonstration about our research resources, methods, and librarian expertise so that they would not spread misinformation about the library and, heaven forbid, fail to properly refer students to us. In fact, this was my first approach as I began working with the tutors. But as my relationship with our writing center develops, I am learning that if I stop assuming that I need to reinforce the barriers or differences between our services and work instead to empower students as ambassadors of information literacy who have essential skills and talents that differ from mine, something much more positive happens. Real collaboration in peer assisted learning promises a much richer experience for all of us as we form meaningful learning communities together.

Bodemer (in press) warns, "Academic libraries would be remiss in not seeking to harness peer learning dynamics to enhance student learning and success" (p. 2). If libraries do not take advantage of the real opportunities for collaboration with writing centers, and by extension with other tutoring services on campus, we are missing a great way to breach the traditional boundaries of both the library and these services. We are missing an opportunity to explore

information literacy as conversation rather than lesson or turf. Most damaging of all, we are perpetuating the artificial barriers between research and writing across the disciplines. And students and faculty alike lose out on the potential creative synergies that the collaborative conversation offers.

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