Letter from the MSU Writing Center Director

The Fall 2017 Writing Center Session Notes, our biannual newsletter put together by our Writing Center tutors, is here! In this edition of Session Notes, we highlight some of the ways we imagine writing centers as potential environments for facilitating both the teaching and learning of writing. We believe all who participate in the activity of writing can connect and learn in the Writing Center – whether tutor, student, staff, or faculty. Our articles this semester reflect some of the learning we have done.

The foundation of our learning in the Writing Center is our peer tutor program. Tayler Veltkamp reminds us of this in her article on presenting at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in Long Island, NY, where four of our tutors presented their research. Our Graduate and Multilingual Writer Specialist Erin Strickland shares her lessons from working with multilingual writers, using her own experiences studying abroad as an example. Her article comes from our tutor-authored blog: https://msuwritingcenterblog.wordpress.com.

Finally, through a generous donation we are excited about the future expansion of our partnerships with STEM faculty! We will be awarding faculty grants to partner with us through our Writing Studio program. The Writing Studio model, which puts students, tutors, faculty, and Writing Center staff in conversation, is one of our favorite ways of learning. As Liz Kovalchuk notes, when we work across disciplines, we learn new ways of thinking and knowing.

Enjoy reading!

Michelle Miley
MSU Writing Center Director
The Value of Undergraduate Research in the Writing Center

Tayler Veltkamp - Peer Tutor

Last month, four of our Writing Center tutors attended the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) at Hofstra University in New York. I had the opportunity to present my individual research applying a concept we are practicing in our writing center: participatory hospitality. My presentation was on a sociological concept, mattering, and how tutors and writing center staff should practice this in their writing centers. I hoped my presentation would be beneficial in other writing centers, and that I could further the conversation about mattering within writing center realms.

What surprised me was that during the conference keynote address, the faculty presenters cited various undergraduate research articles published in the MSU-based journal, Young Scholars in Writing. Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta, authors of The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors, made a case for the merits of undergraduate research. When questioned about the authority of undergraduate researchers, the presenters responded that they consider undergraduate research to be more valuable than the research published by writing center professionals. Tutors are tutoring everyday. And who best to discuss tutoring and tutor development than tutors?

As tutors we accept a certain authority over writing, and we use that authority to have conversations about writing with students who come to our center. In our writing center, we set aside time to discuss any struggles we encountered over that week in tutoring. We seek out each other’s expertise when we are faced with our uncertainties. So why would we not seek out and utilize that expertise from other institutions’ tutors? After attending NCPTW, I have a more fully formed idea of the resources that are available to us as tutors. I’m glad to know we have this cache of undergraduate writing-center-centric research where we can feel represented, validated, and challenged by our peers.

MSU Students’ Favorite Meaningful Writing Assignments

At the beginning of the semester, we asked students to tell us about their most meaningful writing assignments. Here are some of the responses:

“Writing a poem about my father.”
- Jazmyn, Raffle Winner

“Creating a paper explaining my opinion on current events.”

“Writing a research paper on concussions in the NFC.”

“Applying feminism to Engineering disciplines.”

Above: Winner of the Meaningful Writing Assignment Raffle, Jazmyn Austin
The Writing Center Studio Model: Supporting the Learning and Teaching of Writing through Peer Tutoring

We are thrilled to announce the MSU Writing Center has received a donation to support faculty integrating writing into their upper-division STEM classes!

As we develop a culture of writing at MSU, we need to increase the opportunities for students to write within their disciplinary classes. But we recognize that developing new curriculum to include writing requires time and that grading writing is intensive work. Our donation will provide faculty with funding to integrate Writing Studios into their courses. The Studio model is one we endorse because it reflects our commitment to a learning environment that complements rather than duplicates the classroom setting, and it reflects our commitment to student-centered learning. In the Writing Studio model, students enrolled in a large class meet in small groups (five to seven students) throughout the semester. The students work with one another and a Writing Center tutor who is there to facilitate the conversation and provide additional feedback. The students receive feedback from their peers, and they also learn through responding to other students’ writing. Throughout the Studio partnership, the Writing Center stays in conversation with the faculty. This relationship between the Writing Center and the faculty provides a unique opportunity for faculty to “see” how students are engaged in their writing outside of class. Faculty can address questions and needs as they come up, providing additional clarification and instruction that they typically are not aware students need until papers are turned in. Students have the support and the time necessary for revision, which also means faculty receive better papers. Grading becomes a much easier process. And the Writing Center learns from our faculty partners, creating a reciprocal relationship.

Please watch for information about our Writing Studio Innovation Grants!

What Writing Studios Offer Tutors

This semester, Liz Kovalchuk is facilitating writing studios for students in the Electrical Engineering Material Science class:

Working as a studio facilitator with a discipline, Electrical Engineering, that is a part of my college but very different from my own major, Industrial Engineering, has been a way to learn not only about writing but about my field as a whole. It is fascinating to see the overlaps and juxtapositions between our shared experience despite how different the material we study is.
The first time I realized I was not that good at French was when I realized that I had never really learned the alphabet. I had just arrived in France, where I would be studying the next ten months, and I couldn’t spell my name to the woman at the front desk of my dorm. I knew the alphabet, but I never learned how to say it in French.

Despite the embarrassing start, studying abroad wasn’t the worst idea I ever had. But it was incredibly challenging to live abroad and take all my classes in a foreign language.

Even if you don’t have to learn a new alphabet, there is still a mountain of linguistic stuff to master in order to put words on the page in a coherent way. There’s spelling, vocabulary, homophones, (i.e. there, their, they’re). There’s the fact that academic language is different from conversation, so word choice and sentence structure must fit the particular text you are producing. There’s grammar (so. much. grammar!) and things that differ across languages that we don’t necessarily think about, such as punctuation conventions, paragraph organization and logic patterns.

This list doesn’t even consider formatting, personal style, individual voice, or the fact that you’re likely writing the paper to demonstrate some kind of knowledge, which can often be culturally loaded. When I took a history course in France, time periods were referenced by a king or queen’s reign, and it shocked my classmates that I didn’t know or care who Charles V was (some king, I guess).

None of this takes into consideration all of the other things that make living abroad so hard. Friends and family are far away, the food is weird, and no one gets your jokes.

So, the next time someone who speaks English as a second language is bold enough to ask you for help, be patient. Remember that they are displaying some incredible linguistic-ninja skills in order to write in English at all.

To read more tutor blogs, visit www.msuwritingcenterblog.wordpress.com/ and make sure to follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.