

A Tutor Effectiveness Course

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Introduction

The importance and need of well-developed writing skills to the success of college graduates has been well-documented in a number of *NACTA Journal* articles (Schaefer, 1984; Broder and Houston, 1986; Cobia, 1986; Coorts, 1987; Riesenber, 1988; Barkley, 1991). In response to this need, many faculty have increased the amount of writing required in their technical courses. Specific examples of this "writing-across-the-curriculum" program approach have also been provided in several *NACTA Journal* articles (Cobia, 1986; Gamon, 1988; Smith, Poling, and Von Tilburg, 1989; Tudor, 1989; Koch and Houston, 1989; Zimmerman, 1991; Zimmerman, 1992).

Increased writing requirements in courses is accompanied by an increased need on the part of students for advice and assistance in correctly completing their writing assignments outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, the budget reductions now in force on many college campuses often result in less faculty and staff help being made available to students in the form of writing centers and other types of informal, non-classroom assistance in the writing process.

The Ohio State University, Agricultural Technical Institute (OSU/ATI) is a good example of one such campus. OSU/ATI has always emphasized the importance of writing in its curricula and has a strong tradition of faculty involvement and interaction in the writing-across-the-curriculum concept. This is particularly important because like other two-year colleges, OSU/ATI enrolls a high percentage of students who require substantial developmental course work in communication skills. Unfortunately, OSU/ATI has also experienced a considerable reduction in its funding in recent years, caused both by lowered levels of state support and enrollment declines.

The challenge for OSU/ATI faculty and staff is to find ways to do more with less, to continue the commitment of providing campus writing assistance services to accommodate the needs of students and the requirements of writing intensive courses and curricula. The use of volunteer peer tutors, who are concurrently enrolled in a tutor effectiveness course, to help staff the campus Writing Lab has proven to be a success in helping to meet this challenge.

This article will describe the organization and operation of the Writing Lab at OSU/ATI and then focus specifically

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on the development of a course especially designed for students who will serve as volunteer peer tutors.

Writing Lab

The OSU/ATI Writing Lab consists of a dedicated room located centrally on the campus. The primary role of Writing Lab staff is to dialogue with student clients about their writing. The lab room is furnished with a central table for individual writing conferences and tutor stations; there are 12 IBM compatible computers with Wordperfect software located around the perimeter. Writing Lab personnel wrote a basic, user-friendly WordPerfect instruction and reference manual which is available in the Lab. Students can also purchase their own copy of the manual at the campus bookstore.

The Lab is managed by the coordinator for the English program at OSU/ATI (Houston of this article) who is given release time equivalent to one course to supervise the English program and the Writing Lab. Funding is provided by the General Studies Division. The cost of computer repair (which has been minimal thanks to knowledgeable faculty and staff throughout OSU/ATI who are willing to volunteer time when necessary) and supplies are included in the English program budget.

Traditionally, paid peer tutors have been critical to maintaining the Lab. Evaluations of the Writing Lab by student clients repeatedly have shown that students value the high quality support that they receive from caring, knowledgeable tutors. Most student clients are not specifically referred to the Writing Lab by their instructors; instead, they seek out the services of the lab primarily because they have heard of the friendly, helpful, non-threatening atmosphere fostered by the presence of peer tutors.

The long standing campus policy has been to keep the Writing Lab open to student clients from 8 A.M. until 9 P.M. Monday through Thursday; from 8 A.M. until 5 P.M. on Friday; and from 6 P.M. until 9 P.M. on Sunday evening. These times are typically extended during the last two weeks of the quarter. More recently the Writing Lab has also been open on Saturday from 1 P.M. to 4 P.M. There is always one peer tutor in the lab, and it is often staffed with two tutors during afternoon and evening hours when use is at a peak.

The Writing Lab is used most heavily during autumn and winter quarters. Use drops off during the spring and summer quarters when many of the students are off-campus completing their internship requirement. The importance of the Writing Lab to the campus is demonstrated by statistics for

its use during Autumn Quarter, 1992. During this period, the Writing Lab was open and staffed for 732 hours and there were a total of 2,200 student client visits. Over 400 of the 700 students on campus visited the Writing Lab at least once for dialogue with the staff and/or use of the facilities.

The campus has a large general purpose computer lab which is also available for students to use in completing their writing assignments. Traditionally, as a service to students, the Writing Lab has also provided peer writing tutors for this lab during those nights of the week when demand is high. Unfortunately, statistics are not available on the number of students who received assistance from Writing Lab personnel assigned to this lab.

During the 91-92 academic year and again in 92-93, OSU/ATI experienced a substantial budget cut. One result of the adverse budget situation was the reduction in funding for paid peer tutors and other personnel in the Writing Lab. The challenge was to find creative ways to fulfill the long standing commitment of an open Writing Lab readily accessible to students with less use of paid tutors. The solution has been the development and implementation of a tutor effectiveness course.

Tutor Effectiveness Course

Background and Development

In 1991, the new tutoring coordinator (Johnson of this article) observed tutors struggling to work with students whose motivational patterns and learning preferences were different from their own. The peer tutors also expressed to the tutoring coordinator many of their concerns and frustrations about the process of tutoring. Based on these observations and discussions, it was concluded that peer tutors needed a pre-tutoring course which would increase their proficiency in writing, improve their self-confidence, and provide them with an understanding of personality types and learning styles. The Development of Tutor Effectiveness course which resulted has the following objectives:

1. To empower students by enhancing their interpersonal and writing skills so that they can effectively relate to and assist student clients in the Writing Lab.
2. To help students develop an awareness and understanding of themselves and their behavior in relation to their Writing Lab student clients.
3. To provide students with a cognizance of the issues and concerns faced by adult learners and the skills and abilities necessary for effective peer tutoring.

Although the initial purpose of the tutoring course was to help tutors as individuals gain more self-understanding and to improve their tutoring, cuts in the Writing Lab budget have provided additional motivation to offer the course. Students enrolled in the tutor effectiveness course have become a major factor in the ability of the Writing Lab to continue to meet the needs of student clients.

Since Autumn Quarter, 1991, all students who want to be peer tutors in the Writing Lab are *required* to complete the Development of Tutor Effectiveness course. However, students can use the course to fulfill one of their three Social Science elective requirements. Students need permission

and must meet a number of requirements in order to enroll in the course.

As part of the course requirements, students must tutor between 42 and 48 hours per quarter in the Writing Lab. Since this is a class assignment, the students are not paid for these hours of peer tutoring. By the end of Autumn Quarter, 1992, Development of Tutor Effectiveness had been offered a total of four times with 42 students having completed the course. This represents a total savings in peer tutoring costs in the Writing Lab of over \$8,500.00 for the period of Autumn Quarter, 1991 through Autumn Quarter, 1992.

Although the tutoring course has become one of the most important factors in maintaining the full operation of the Writing Lab in light of budget cuts, its benefits to the tutors and their Writing Lab student clients are even more important.

Students

Students enrolling in Development of Effective Tutoring represent a good cross-section of the majors on the campus. About 66% of the students who have completed the tutoring course were from horticultural, 12% from animal science, 12% from agricultural business, and 10% from engineering technologies. These numbers approximate the enrollment pattern on the campus as a whole. All students who have taken the course have been full time students, and 36% have been nontraditional students.

Students who want to enroll in Development of Tutor Effectiveness must have completed all three of the required Communication Skills courses with a minimum grade of B and also need a recommendation from one of their Communication Skills instructors. Students must have an overall minimum GPA of 3.0 and are required to demonstrate appropriate commitment, motivation, and writing ability.

Course Content, Procedures, and Organization

The course is a three credit hour (quarter basis) offering which requires three hours of class sessions or other activities per week for ten weeks. Class meetings are held in a classroom with moveable tables and chairs which allow for a flexible seating arrangement to accommodate small group work and role playing. Constant attempts are made throughout the quarter to involve all students and to relate the material to the "real world" of peer tutoring.

While the instructor occasionally presents some background material with the use of overheads, videos, and other visuals; most of the classroom activities are based on discussion and role-playing exercises. Typically, students are asked to work in groups on activities designed to help them gain a clearer self-understanding. Follow-up discussions help students to assimilate the knowledge they have gained, putting into practice what they have learned by applying their knowledge to their tutoring situations.

At the first class session students receive a detailed syllabus with an expanded course description/rationale which helps prepare students for the unconventional nature of the material, describes how the course is structured, and explains the need for such a course. Specific topics included in the course include self-understanding and self-confidence, learning styles and strategies, tutoring styles and tech-

niques, learning disabilities, listening skills, communication skills, motivational skills and strategies, diversity issues, study skills including collaborative learning, and time management. Although the instructor makes sure that all of these topics are covered by the end of the quarter, there is considerable flexibility as to when a particular subject is addressed.

Students are introduced to the concepts of individual learning styles and personality types during the first two class meetings. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is used as the basis for the presentation of these topics. All students take the MBTI prior to the first class meeting, and evaluating their own results helps students become more aware of their learning styles and preferences as well as their motivational propensities.

While the MBTI is not designed to be a comprehensive instrument for measuring learning styles (Provost & Anchors, 1987), it is a valuable tool for indicating the way individuals prefer to receive information, to make judgments, to draw energy, and to order their lives (Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Myers & Myers, 1980). The students' MBTI results can be used to predict behaviors, instructional tools, and environmental factors which facilitate or hinder their learning (Provost & Anchors, 1987).

Beginning with the third class meeting, session topics are typically based on issues raised when students share and discuss their tutoring activities and experiences. While this approach is very demanding in that the instructor needs to be ready each week for every topic, it provides an excellent environment for need based learning. It also allows classmates to help each other evaluate various situations encountered while tutoring and determine appropriate responses. Setting aside class time for sharing the joys and frustrations of tutoring also provides the students with their own peer tutor support group.

Students are required to keep a journal of all tutoring experiences as a tool to help gain greater self-understanding. As one student indicated in a journal entry, "A great deal of what I learned came from experience and the recording of that experience in my journal." In addition to recording content related activities in their journals, students also explore their responses and their tutees' responses to activities occurring in the tutoring sessions. Journals are collected each week and returned with written feedback which is often used as a catalyst for discussion or role-play activities.

Since a suitable text is not available for the course, students are required to read a minimum of fifteen selections from current literature which deal with learning styles and strategies, teaching styles and strategies, learning disabilities, motivational techniques, listening skills, and other relevant areas of human behavior. A collection of relevant books and articles is placed on reserve in the library, but students are also invited to search for other pertinent sources. Students are encouraged to share with classmates any articles or books that they found to be especially helpful.

The final course requirement is for students to write a major paper which is a synthesis of what they have learned

through their readings, their tutoring experiences, the classroom activities, and their journal writing. The paper is written in the first person and is a means of demonstrating the fulfillment of the course objectives.

Grades are assigned for the course based on a contract grading system involving participation in classroom activities, quality of journal writing, number of tutoring sessions conducted, quality of the final paper, and oral meetings with the instructor. The course has no written tests or quizzes. Overall performance of students in the course is extremely high as might be expected given the motivation and dedication of the students who enroll. The average GPA for all four classes offered to date is 3.83 (on a 4.0 scale).

Evaluation

Student evaluations of Development of Tutor Effectiveness have been very positive. The standard University Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) course evaluation is provided to students during the ninth week of the term. Mean values for the student responses have been in the +1.3 to +2 range (on a scale of -2 to +2) every time the course has been taught; this is well above overall College and University mean values. Written comments provided by students on the SET forms have also been overwhelmingly positive and supportive.

Student suggestions for improvement have included simplifying the procedure for arranging tutoring time, doing more in-depth work with the issue of learning disabilities, and meeting more often for support. The procedure for arranging tutors has been evaluated each quarter and greatly simplified with added secretarial support. The issue of providing more information about learning disabilities is now covered through the PBS video "How Difficult Can This Be?" (1990) and through a presentation by the learning disabilities specialist at OSU/ATI. Instead of having the class meet more often, the instructor encourages those students seeking more support to make office visits and to network with classmates and experienced tutors.

Conclusion

The increased use in the campus Writing Lab of peer tutors who are enrolled in the Development of Tutor Effectiveness course has proven to be of considerable value to tutors, students, faculty, and the college.

Writing Lab tutors have gained confidence in themselves, developed greater self-awareness and self-understanding, improved their own interpersonal and writing skills, and become aware of issues and concerns faced by adult learners. As one student wrote in a journal entry, "I was leery about taking the class because the image I had of myself was that I wasn't smart but just average. I have gained a new image since taking this class because I fit in and in general the student body looks up to me for help." Another student wrote, "I learned a lot about myself and the people that I tutored. I found out that, due to different personality types, tutoring involves more than just explaining [writing] to someone. This class helped me to understand this much better, thus making me a better tutor."

Student clients of the Writing Lab have benefitted in that

Academic Behaviors as a Function of Academic Achievement, Locus of Control & Motivational Orientation

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Abstract

Investigated the academic behaviors, locus of control, and motivational orientation of students ($n = 161$) majoring in agriculture at a mid-southern university. The instruments used were the Study Habits Inventory (Jones & Slate, 1992), the Academic Locus of Control Scale (Trice, 1985), and the Educational Participation Scale (Boshier, 1971). Students responded appropriately to only 50.8% of the questions measuring academic behaviors, and demonstrated several characteristic weaknesses in note-taking, studying, and reading. Grade point average was positively correlated with students' academic behavior ($r = .43$), and negatively related to students' locus of control score ($r = -.45$). Grades were also negatively correlated with motivational orientations focusing on social relationships ($r = -.16$) and external expectations ($r = -.17$), but these relationships were weak. Implications for intervention programs are addressed.

Agriculture and related industries comprise a major source of jobs for Americans, and jobs in these fields will continue to increase (Arkansas Department, 1990). In spite of this promising job market, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) found that colleges of agriculture in Arkansas have difficulty retaining students. Thus, ADHE has projected a deficit in the future supply of agri-

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the tutors with whom they work are much better prepared and qualified to offer the necessary assistance. Students have also benefitted in that the Writing Lab schedule has not been curtailed in spite of budgetary cutbacks. In addition, faculty and the college have benefitted in that students continue to have available outside the classroom the substantial writing support which is so critical to writing intensive courses and student retention. The tutor effectiveness course has truly been a winning combination for all involved.

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cultural scientists, technicians, and business professionals needed by industries and government agencies in Arkansas. If such shortages are to be reduced, research must identify factors that contribute to the low retention rate among agriculture students. Because academic difficulties cause many college students to fail to complete their degree programs (Tinto, 1985), research that identifies variables related to the academic achievement among agriculture students needs to be conducted.

Students' basic academic skills is one variable that affects the persistence of college students through its effect on academic achievement (Kowalski, 1982; Brozo, Schmelzer, & Thurber, 1982). Researchers have found that many college students lack necessary academic skills. For example, Hart and Keller (1980) found that college students with less than a C average their first semester reported that the major reasons for their low achievement were poor time management skills, poor study skills, and poor test-taking skills. More recently, Jones, Slate, and their colleagues have found large academic skill deficiencies among students in a general education course (Slate, Jones, & Stone, 1990) and graduating seniors in a teacher education program (Jones, Slate, & Kyle, 1992; Lawler-Prince, Slate, & Jones, in press). Thus, if agriculture students are similar to other college student populations, a lack of adequate academic skills is contributing to the poor retention rate for agriculture students.

Researchers have also found that noncognitive variables affect college students' academic achievement and persis-

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