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Consultant Insight

Connecting Writing Centers to Libraries, from an Undergraduate Tutor's Perspective: a Brief Literature Review

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More and more frequently, libraries are resituating their writing centers, encouraging cross-campus collaboration. We can see examples of this in the University of Wisconsin- Madison's Ott Memorial Writing Center, as documented in "Won't You Be (More Than) My Neighbor? Writing Center/Library Partnerships" written by Heather James and Rebecca Nowacek, and the NOEL Studio at Eastern Kentucky University, as described in "Collaboration Station" by Melissa Ezarik. However, as a peer tutor in a small liberal arts college where the writing center and the library are still treated as two separate entities, I have always seen the acts of writing and of researching taught as completely unconnected activities. In actuality, they are two parts of a larger whole.

Given my own personal interest in library science as a potential career path and my school's writing center's plan to move to the library, I was interested to learn more about how the center

and the library work together. My goal was to find sources that explore this collaboration and that would prove useful for other writing center staffers. The usefulness would be evident when working with students grappling with this pedagogically divided, yet simultaneously enacted, process of writing a research paper.¹ In this essay, I connect a range of sources that peer writing consultants might find useful in helping students understand that the writing process begins during the research process.

The fact that the pedagogies of research and of writing are performed separately from each other but that first year students have to figure out how to do them at the same time was something I had never considered before taking on this project. James Elmborg details this separation in “Locating the Center: Libraries, Writing Centers, and Information Literacy.” Elmborg argues that the writing center and the library are “fundamentally interconnected” through student writing but that there is a “disconnect” between their approaches. This is illustrated by Elmborg when he describes the approach generally taken with writing instruction as focusing on “language usage” and “questions of academic genre,” while information literacy instruction relies on how to write “good search statements” and to “evaluat[e] ... sources.” By the end of the article, Elmborg wants the reader to recognize writing and research as one single activity. This realization was significant for me because peer tutors are at the center of this divide. As a peer tutor, I couldn’t help but wonder how my own treatment of sessions would have been different if I had any awareness of

¹*It is important to acknowledge that every source I found was directed largely, if not entirely, at librarians. I was unable to find any sources that included voices or examples given from peer tutors in a significant way.*

this discourse when working with students struggling with the combination of the two. My instinct is simply to have a conversation with the patron about as much of their project as possible before I feel too out of my league, and I then recommend a visit to the library itself. What if I had realized that I could open that conversation up to include those librarians that I was sending the students to anyway?

The main problem is summarized in Barbara Alvarez's "A New Perspective on Reference: Crossing the Line between Research and Writing." She argues that there is an institutional separation between the library and the writing center; this divide forces students to "cross the line" between the two while doing academic work. She wants writing center staffers and librarians to cross this line with them through both "an adjustment of perspective" and "a holistic view of the research-writing process" (5). Essentially, librarians would take a more personal approach with students, focusing more specifically on the individual and the assignment, as opposed to helping them find as many sources as possible. This requires librarians to reexamine the types of questions they are asking and calls on them to adopt the philosophy: "work on the writer, rather than the writing" (7). While this argument is directed at librarians specifically, peer tutors should familiarize themselves with the benefits of this approach, as it is instrumental to understanding the process of writing/researching utilized by their potential patrons and how those they hope to collaborate with are working/thinking.

One way to reframe this conversation is through the discourse of space itself. Elmborg discusses the “crisis of space” that seems to be happening in both writing centers and libraries (9). He asserts that writing centers are often associated with “bad space, assigned as they are to isolated, hard-to-find office with insufficient technology,” while libraries are in “a crisis of space,” referring to the changing nature of libraries as new technologies emerge (9). He argues that both spaces benefit when they become centers of collaboration (9-10). This assertion of the redefinition of the library’s space is echoed in Andrew Ashton’s “The Entropic Library.” He argues that, rather than theorizing the library’s move towards a more digital realm as replacing what already exists within a library, we should instead “explode [the library’s services] out into a complementary state of empathy” (141). He maintains throughout, however, that the role of the librarian within this space has remained the same—that they are still “gatekeepers and guides for information resources” (142). In “The Wrong Business for Libraries,” Christine Madsen contests this claim surrounding the role of the librarian within this changing space. She argues that libraries are not simply buildings with books in them, but rather spaces for discourse, discussion, and interaction. This function was lost along the way, she argues, because of the shift from the “scholar-centered model” to an “information-centered one” (143). Madsen claims that if we continue to focus on how libraries provide access to information and nothing more, then the system will fail. Instead, we should view libraries as “a collection of services” (144). While Ashton and Madsen do not directly disagree, Ashton takes a resigned approach to the role of librarians while Madsen calls for a reform. Writing Center tutors, then, should look for opportunities within this reform

to actualize closer relationships with librarians, expanding and exploring the ways they can collaborate to serve students.

Elmborg introduces yet another way to grapple with the understanding of changing space in his piece, “Libraries as the Spaces Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space.”² Using Homi Bhabha’s definition of Third Space, Elmborg argues that the library can function as this Third Space because it already is a place for people to come where they are “intellectually crossing boundaries” (346), but the real distinction for whether a library is a Third Space or purely rigid and designated for particular tasks lies with the librarian and the patron. If a librarian is to take on the task of making a Third Space, Elmborg says they must engage with the student, learning more about who they are and what they care about, which ultimately means that “librarians need to see themselves as personally engaged with the personal lives of library users” (348)—crossing boundaries into a personal/intellectual space that they may not be familiar or comfortable with. While this discussion in no way incorporates writing centers explicitly, the underlying principles and goals are integral to being a successful writing center staffer, especially engaging with the patron on a personal level, which is something that is already explicitly part of the center’s training. Peer tutors always begin a session with a few minutes of informal conversation, establishing a personal connection with students that lays the groundwork for an open, collaborative reviewing process. Understanding that the

²Elmborg describes Bhabha’s definition of Third Space as one where those “with less obvious social, political, or military power” are still capable of resisting existing dominant structures and exerting influence simply by “occupying” and “appropriating” that space (345).

pedagogies for research and writing are two very different roads to the same end goal, roads that ultimately do not need to be so separated as evidenced by the existing shared spaces, is perhaps the most important takeaway, perhaps one that peer tutors can help librarians with through collaborative engagements.

However, even as peer tutors can help librarians to cross boundaries, the opposite should also occur. I participated in an embedded tutor project my junior year, where along with one of my coworkers from the center we worked closely with a single First-Year Research Seminar class. We attended session where prompts were handed out, went to workshops at the library with them, gave personalized letters as feedback, and had individual meetings with each student in the class. I attended the workshops at the library where the students received instruction on how to research, what types of questions to ask, and where they could look for beginnings to their answers. Students were given an exercise where they were asked to write three different potential research questions. The librarian leading the workshop then called on me and my colleague to go around and check in on the students. I remember feeling jolted into place. I had been listening intently, but I had not actually foreseen myself as part of what was happening. Up until that point my role in the class existed in those individual meetings. I immediately did what was asked, and to the best of my ability, but I can't help but feel that an understanding of Third Spaces would have made me a better tutor in that situation. If I had from the start seen myself as integral to the workshop run by the librarian on the research process, something I normally do not see in my sessions with patrons, perhaps I would have more discernibly been a collaborator in that space. As writing centers

move to libraries, sessions are going to change. As writing centers move to libraries, tutors and librarians can work together to create a supportive environment for student writing and research.³

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