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Consultant Insight

Course Embedded Tutoring, New Genres, and the Small College Environment: An Exploration and Reflection

Emma Masur

Course-embedded initiatives¹ based in writing centers have been considered by scholars in a variety of ways. For example, research conducted by Bromley and Regaignon shows that “writing fellows programs do make a difference in students’ writing. This approach to WAC makes both faculty and students across campus more conscious of the expectations of discipline-specific writing” (Bromely and Regaignon 58). Similarly, Whiddon and Carpenter argue that “such programming, at its best, helps to break down the complicated relationship and potential division between instructor and student” (Whiddon and Carpenter). Whether the discussion is of the CEC’s impact upon student writer growth, student writer confidence, promotion of collaborative learning, or simply creating better visualization for the Writing Center as a whole, CEC programming has begun to challenge the typical academic geographies that influence the divide seen between classrooms and their respective support spaces.

As a writing center staffer at a small liberal arts college in Lexington, Kentucky, I became interested in CEC work as a result of my deep involvement with the university’s Writing, Rhetoric, and Communication major. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to

¹ Often referred to as “Course Embedded Consultants,” “Writing Fellows” or “Writing Associates” programs by a variety of colleges.

show the positive and measurable impact of CEC work on student writing within a single course throughout one semester; this research also provides a close-up examination of a specific course from the perspective of an undergraduate staffer—a rare voice not generally heard throughout a much larger conversation as a whole.

As a course-embedded staffer and researcher, I worked with an Introduction to Classical Rhetoric course taught during the fall 2019 semester. Students were faced with a variety of written tasks, including a multimodal podcast assignment. This research gathers both qualitative and quantitative data from three anonymous surveys, as well as my own personal observations with students gained via session notes that were required of each TUWC student visit. Through my collected data, I was able to answer the following questions pertaining to this research:

1. How does a CEC program benefit the student writer as a whole?
2. What type of influence does a CEC program have on students with limited writing experience, and with especially limited backgrounds in digital composition?
3. In what ways does a CEC program, utilizing a multimodal component, differ from a program without?

Unlike other scholarship written about CEC programs, I was the only consultant involved in this research process. My experience allows for a ground-level viewpoint into the writing lives of a small group of writers. Having a tutor perspective enriches already-existing work by other scholars, given my ability to relate to other students' experiences and having already taken this particular course. My research offers a close-up look at a single CEC-course in real time, and in light of previous scholarship, considers the strengths and challenges of CEC programming in a university setting as a whole.

Student Participation and Satisfaction

Due to my role as a CEC, I developed a sustained relationship with each class participant, as well as a deeper understanding of this course's specific assignments. I was thus able to cater to the individual needs of each student not only throughout the brainstorming processes, but throughout their overall writing processes. All 12 students responded to a question on Survey 1 pertaining to any previous knowledge about

brainstorming strategies in particular: 90% indicated they were familiar with “talking with a peer” as a brainstorming/invention strategy, 90% chose bulleted lists, 81% chose pen and paper, 73% chose mapping/diagramming, and 73% chose freewriting (see *fig. 1*). This finding suggests that the writing process differs between each student. It also reiterates ideas offered by Dvorak et al. by showing how the learning environment helped them to articulate their needs as student writers. An inclusive learning environment must first be cultivated in order for students of all disciplines to feel comfortable at any step of the writing process. By allowing each student to work through their own process of discovering the best ways in which to formulate their argument, the student is simultaneously creating an identity for themselves as creators of prose (Dvorak et al.). Thus, CEC's have a unique opportunity, given the sustained and substantive relationships made, to support a wide range of learning needs.

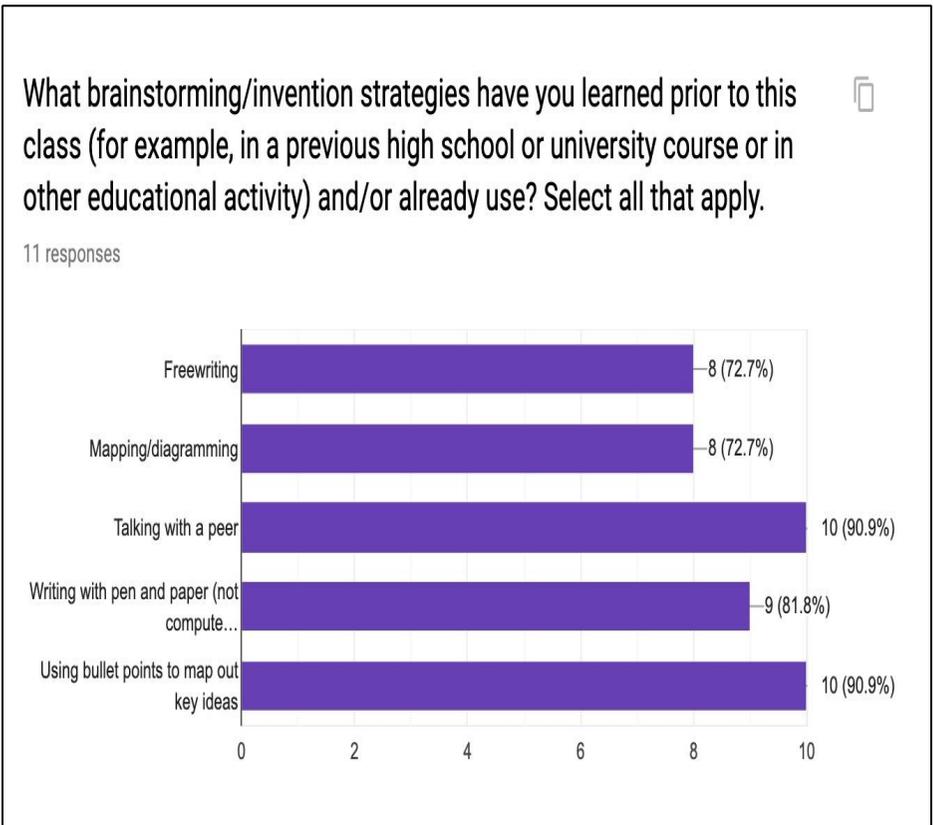


Figure 1: Student Familiarity with Various Brainstorming Invention Strategies

All class participants took advantage of this initiative, as seen through the surveys provided throughout the semester. As shown in *fig. 2* below, the majority of students were extremely satisfied with their experience. As expected, the students enrolled in the Classical Rhetoric course stem from a variety of disciplines. Because of this melting pot of disciplines all enrolled, it is fair to assume that all students see writing through a different lens, and many may have a difficult time adjusting to a more writing-intensive course. By taking the time to make note of each distinctive identity that participates within the CEC program, one can assert that “writing fellows programs do seem to make a positive and measurable difference in students’ writing” (Bromley and Regaignon).

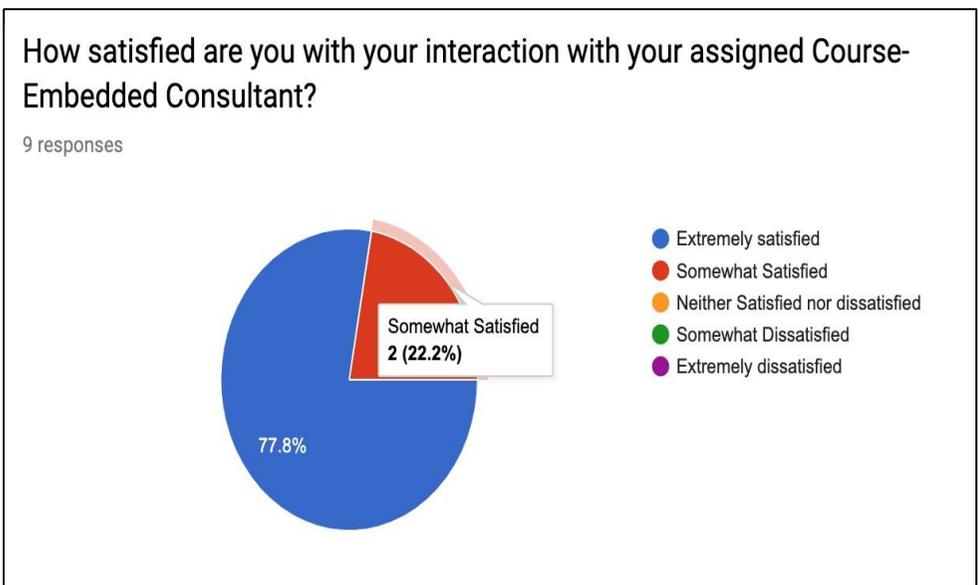


Figure 2: Results from Student-Satisfaction Survey

By implementing the CEC program within this course, I have been able to notice first-hand the implications of allowing students to utilize their own creative practices. Likewise, Webster and Hansen state that, “The vacuum between the individual-student-as-writer and individual-professor-as-reader becomes less pronounced as students experience the benefits of feedback without the associated risk they often perceive in the student-faculty transaction” (Webster and Hansen). As a result, it is

imperative to allow students to explore their own capabilities in an environment that is stripped of the pressures of a letter grade. This practice allows for more conversation to flow, and also provides an opportunity for learning within the Writing Center itself. When students willingly work with a CEC throughout a semester, collaboration between peers is emphasized as each student learns new strategies from the other regarding the fundamental writing process overall.

Observations of Tutoring Sessions

It is crucial to consider institutional context when exploring cross-campus collaborations. By situating this conversation within the context of a small, liberal arts school in Lexington, Kentucky, the audience is given a different perspective of CEC programming as a whole. Previous research involving CEC programs has typically been conducted at large institutions. Furthermore, small colleges tend to brand themselves about relationships and mentoring, meaning that the basic representatives of CEC work ground themselves in close-knit relationships. Since the class sizes at TU are small, I was able to know each student involved in the program on a personal level. I knew their names, their disciplines, their likes and dislike. I also learned of their academic goals, as well as personal and professional aspirations. Because of these intimate relationships, I was able to work closer with these students within the Writing Center than I would have if this program had been conducted at a larger institution. Situating this research within a small university environment helps to expand upon the unique approach to this specific CEC program.

Throughout my observations, I noticed that many students were unsure as to how to begin a rhetorical analysis, lowering their confidence levels as writers from the beginning of the process. Many of the initial sessions posed as brainstorming meetings in order to help ground the students in the start of the writing process. Although many of the students felt frustrated that we were not working on the bulk of the assignment, I was able to persuade each student that prompt work and outlining is just as critical as writing the paper itself. The goal was to help students feel as though they were still being efficient with their time spent working on this assignment, even if they were not writing the actual paper yet. This approach helped to solidify an appreciation for the Writing Center within the student from the start. Macauley helps to solidify this claim by

stating, “when writing processes, rhetorical choices, audiences, or reader experiences are emphasized, the WF can have a great deal more to offer because, along with her expertise, she is a unique audience and a specific reader” (Macauley 46). By developing the drive for students to attend sessions within the Writing Center, I was able to get the student to *want* to come back in the future to collaborate on writing tasks with peers consistently. In totality, the implementation of a CEC in any course helps to emphasize the importance of collaboration and simultaneously spurs students in the direction of the Writing Center as well.

Not all students have similar ways in which to approach the writing process. For example, one response from Survey 2 dictates, “I think [the CEC] and I have different approaches to brainstorming and creating a forecasting statement, so it was frustrating when her and I did not start on the same footing from the start.” This comment illustrates how the writing process varies for all individuals, whether the student studies a writing intensive discipline or not. The student cited above from Survey 2 did, however, take the time to work with another staffer, and later come back to work with myself, giving her a diverse set of comments to help formulate her thoughts. As a result, this student showed how a positive, collaborative learning atmosphere is effective, as the student clearly did not feel as though they were confined to working with one single Writing Center staffer (Macauley). The Writing Center itself produces an environment in which students are encouraged to create conversation with more than one peer, which helps to forge a transparent educational experience overall. Additionally, collaborative learning with multiple peers helps students employ the Writing Center throughout the entirety of their own writing process (Macauley and Mauriello). As a result, it is the hope that these students have a newfound drive to utilize the Writing Center as a center for academic learning and growth overall.

Working with Students on Multimodal Projects

Although there are many studies that examine various aspects of CEC work, none delve deeply in how CEC work can engage and support students working in multimodal genres—especially students who might not have significant experience in writing via digital, online or aural tools. Given my experience, CEC work can be a way to directly support student writing growth especially when dealing with new tools or

unfamiliar genres. The assignment for this specific course requires students to revisit a presentation given earlier in the term that explains and defines an assigned logical fallacy, and asks them to revitalize the content in the form of a podcast. The survey in *fig. 3* asked the students to rate their proficiency with composing using audio recording platforms on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest). In their responses, 45.5% of students chose 2 as their personal level of competence with these types of platforms, 27.3% rated themselves as a 4, 18.2% rated themselves as a 1, and 9.1% rated themselves as a 3. From this data alone, it is clear that this group of students were *not* inherently familiar with audio recording tools and for this particular course, creating a podcast.

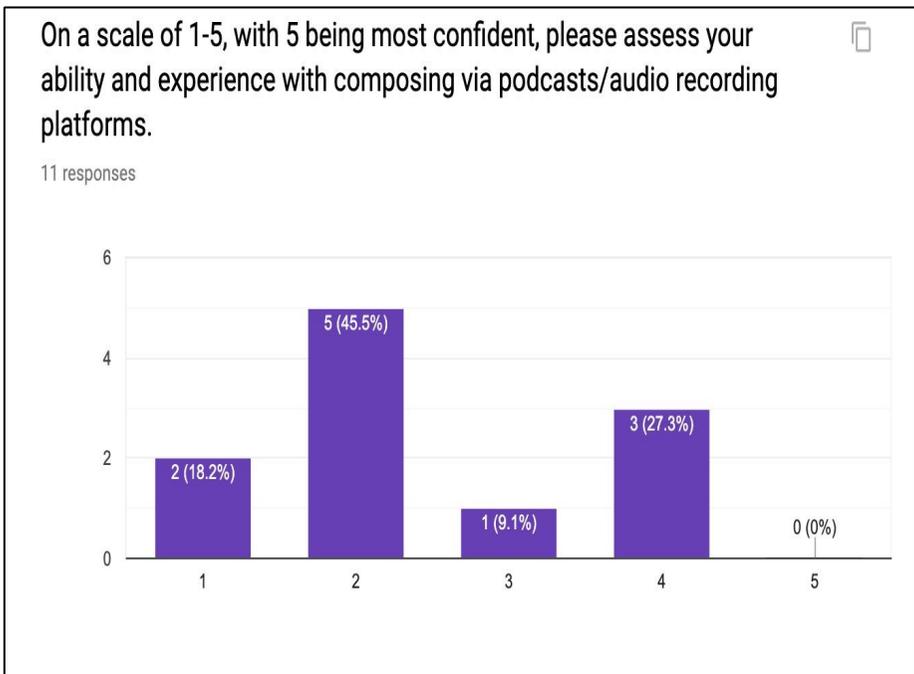


Figure 3. Student Familiarity with Audio Recording Platforms

Throughout my experience, I have found that working with an unfamiliar genre when attempting to write articulate prose has an immense impact on student writing. When students were asked to create a discourse labeled as a “podcast” rather than a “paper,” they were immediately intimidated by the assignment. However, this multimodal influence was by no means negative; it asked the students to think deeper on the

subject, and consider ways in which to translate the written word into an audio recording. The survey results above show that with greater confusion on an assignment, more students were likely to attend meetings at the Writing Center throughout the drafting and revision process. According to the survey in *fig. 4*, 90.9% of students visited the Writing Center at least once in preparation for the multimodal aspect of the project. As a result, this finding correlates well with the idea that the Writing Center is a space in which students feel drawn to work through each and every step of their writing process, regardless of the medium in which the assignment is expressed (Macauley). Based on my research, I have found that students feel less confident in their work because they are creating prose on a platform that is unfamiliar and out of their area of expertise. As a result, these students learn how to take the spoken word and turn it into functional rhetoric, which is a skill that is likely to be useful in later life, even if the students do not recognize it in the moment.

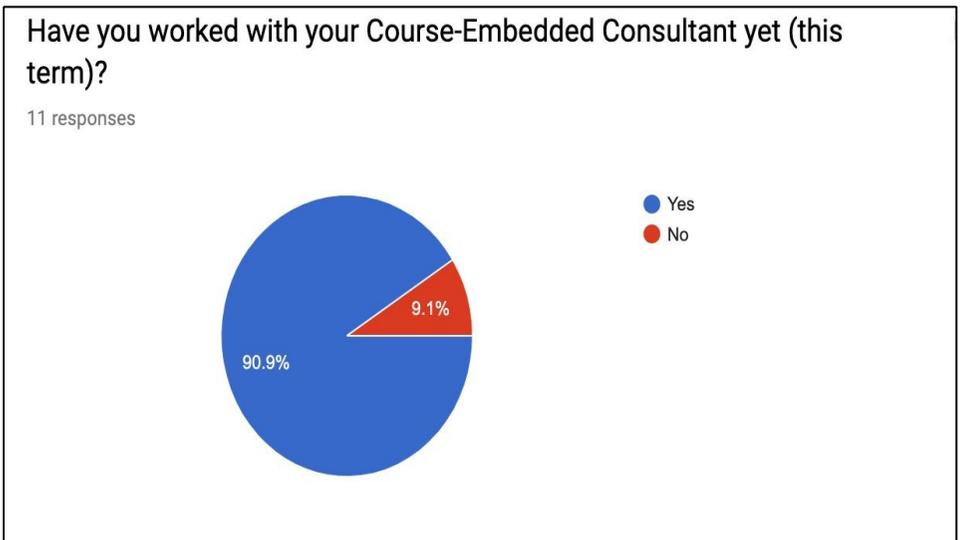


Figure 4. Percentage of Students Who Did/Did Not Work with CEC

Conclusion: Moving Forward

My research affirms much of the extant scholarly conversation about CEC work. Regardless of university size, or mission, when a CEC program is well-orchestrated, designed and supported, this type of program has been proven to be beneficial for any writer of any discipline. That said, CEC programs are not a cure-all. A writing program has to work in concert with other programs, and one cannot expect one

approach to work for everything program the same. When concerning the advantages seen through this program specifically at TU, the small class size (12 students total) gave way for a more intimate relationship between student and CEC, as well as faculty and student. By meeting with the same 12 students consistently throughout the course of a single semester, I was able to develop personal relationships with these students, and also get to know each and every individualized writing process.

With the success of any CEC program also comes its challenges, and the CEC program at my institution was not immune. With the small class sizes comes a small pool of survey results, which still yielded only a handful of responses to each survey. Unfortunately, some students also did not take the time to respond to the survey, which impacted the results significantly. However, other students showed that they truly valued the conversations taking place within the Writing Center, which solidified within me a sense of purpose and pride in the work of this program.

My experience as a CEC has reinforced my belief in the need for the Writing Center on campus and the improvements it can make on student writing. Not only has it been shown that the Writing Center is beneficial for students across any discipline, but it helps to shape the students as writers and people together. CEC work at a small college plays into other rhetorical frameworks that are seen as part of small college life: developing close relationships; mentoring opportunities, and one on one attention. Overall, the students enrolled in the course stated that they did not have a productive experience in the Writing Center until the CEC program was implemented within their classroom this past semester. Intentional partnerships between a classroom and a writing center not only help create better visualization for writing programs, but also-and perhaps most importantly-help students successfully grow as both print and multimodal writers. Overall, I believe the advantages to this type of work greatly outweigh any possible detriments. CEC work is highly rewarding, as I get to observe first-hand students grow not only as creators of prose, but as individuals.

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