Starting From Scratch: Utilizing Literary Leadership's Roles in ESL Based Writing Centers

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Introduction

The Florida Institute of Technology, which was founded in 1958 to provide supplemental education for individuals working at the Kennedy Space Center, has now blossomed into a competitive tier-one research school boasting some 8,000+ students. Of these said students, roughly 30+% are international. With such a diverse population studying everything from aeronautical science to biomedical engineering, clear and concise rhetorical skills are not only encouraged but vital to one's success ("About Florida Tech" 1).

Taking a page from Dr. Don McAndrew's renowned book, *Literacy Leadership: Six Strategies for Peoplework*, the School of Arts and Sciences is currently resurrecting the Writing Center, which was formerly housed under the Academic Success Center. By building upon McAndrew's six key strategies, including "creating a vision, being a model, experimenting with new ideas, nurturing competence, encouraging the heart, and transforming lives through reflection and learning," its livelihood relies on the support of faculty members and graduate students (21-22).

The proposition in this article is simple, and that is to utilize so-called "people skills," skills that are deeply rooted in leadership research and theory, when dealing with L2+ populations. That is to say, we must rethink our traditional, one-size-fits-all model of writing instruction/mentoring in a Writing Center setting to better suit the needs of our international students' unique linguistic, social, and cognitive needs (Matsuda 638-640). Just as every student is different, every pedagogy should be flexible enough to take risks and learn through trial and error.

Creating a Vision

According to McAndrew, the quest for a literary leader is divided into three parts: visions of the operation in our lives and world, visions of the best classrooms, and visions of the wider profession. He adds:

> So teacher leaders must learn to create a vision of literacy, their classroom, and themselves as professionals, and they must learn to communicate that vision to themselves, their students, their colleagues, the community, and the profession. There is no short order. (47)

One of the ways Professor Joy Patterson, who intends to rejuvenate the Florida Institute of Technology's Writing Center, plans on creating a vision in an ESL based community is to make tutors aware of the cultural expectations within each L2 population. With such a diverse population, including a large Saudi Arabian, Korean, and Turkish base, pronouns, articles, and syntaxes differ a great deal. Furthermore, plagiarism is a ubiquitous issue because some cultures believe in the sharing of ideas more freely (Patterson).

Kouzes and Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*, touch upon this personalization of a vision in the Janus Effect, which essentially asks leaders to look at individuals' past experiences and backgrounds before laying out a plan for their futures. By doing so, "we can gain a greater appreciation for how long it can take to fulfill aspirations" (119). In the case of writing, and the multiple revisions that accompany the craft, personal attention to one's background creates empathy, and "personal enthusiasm and passion" lend themselves to a vision of collaboration (McAndrew 61).

Be a Model

In addition to taking interest in one's background, five areas should maintain consistency in order to provide a working model, which includes (1) honoring commitments, (2) upholding composure in formal and informal situations, (3) asking questions, (4) spending time with likeminded individuals, and (5) the organization of one's physical surroundings (McAndrew 65).

Concerning the last position, Nanus states a traditional classroom, a large desk showing power with neatly tucked in rows of smaller desks, is off-putting, stating, "architecture and the design of physical space send powerful signals about status, preferred ways of interaction, and the best ways to get work done" (231). Instead, he recommends smaller desks, round if applicable, and movable chairs. To an ESL student, this layout is more conducive to a level playing field, where the individual being tutored is not overlooked and/or threatened (Hall 19).

Patterson adds that the description of the physical space is somewhat of a rhetorical tightrope. The word "center" is considered too remedial-like by some. If "lab" follows the word "writing," others find it clinical, cold, and sterile. The writing "studio," however, has evoked a sense of calmness and tranquility by the masses. It sounds inviting, like a place to hone one's craft and create.

As trite as it may appear on the outside, the Feng Shui layout of a Writing Center, coupled with a title that does not advocate an evacuation plan, is important. Because there are so many misconceptions about Writing Centers, including everything from it is only for remedial students to it is a form of cheating, providing a positive working model is vital in the beginning stages (Downs and Wardle 554-555).

Experiment with New Ideas

A one-size-fits-all Writing Center, especially in dealing with diverse ESL populations, is not only a recipe for idleness but disaster. Instead, contemporary literacy leaders encourage educators to think outside the box and cut against the grain. Katzenmeyer and Moller, authors of *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Leadership Development for Teachers*, state:

> teachers take risks to move beyond their usual roles because they want to expand their sphere of influence and because they are interested in their own professional growth. (80)

The traditional classroom, where the teacher speaks and students listen, has been the norm for a majority of these students, and yet this model fails to take into account multiples intelligences, which was brought to light by Howard Gardner's book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*.

Thus, for the musically inclined student, showing a YouTube clip might be helpful while tutoring. For the spatial student, some Writing Center tutors have employed sheets of butcher paper for the students to write out their thoughts in a comic book-like form, which can be seen as a storyboard vs. disconnected paragraphs. For the bodily-kinesthetic student, a fieldtrip of the mind could be in order, as McAndrew praises the teacher that scattered sand across the classroom floor when teaching about tidal waves to make that tactile, immediate connection (89).

Regardless of the medium, trying and failing is key when tutoring ESL communities. What works for one student and/or learning community may not work for another. However, initiating incremental steps and learning from one's mistakes promotes psychological hardiness, which, in turn, creates a more innovative program (Kouzes and Posner 205).

Nurture Competence

Nurturing competence is a two-fold process, both of the tutors and tutees. Cook, author of *10-Minute Guide to Motivating People*, believes the bottom line for both parties is trust. Trust, in this sense, also includes respect, willingness to share ideas, and letting go of the need to micromanage (87).

Creating interactions, according to Patterson, is a fundamental building block. For instance, asking other departments to provide feedback in cross curriculum activities builds a sense of "we," and it brings to light, on the students' behalf, the interconnectedness of the disciplines. Likewise, the development of groups, like a Creative Writing Club, and supplemental tutoring hours around sporting activities, offer a sense of visible support. Participation is optional, but it is highly encouraged to better one's competencies.

Leaders, according to Boyatzis and McKee, "who are team players generate an atmosphere of friendly collegiality and are themselves models of respect, helpfulness, and cooperation" (256). They add by stressing the collaborative effect, always "we" vs. "I", it emphasizes spirit and identity, thus forging relationships between individuals, or in this case, the tutors and tutees (256).

Encourage the Heart

Encouraging the heart, much like nurturing a sense of competence, is all about taking that extra step with beginning writers. Too often, according to Doug Enders, author of "The Idea Check: Changing ESL Students' Use of the Writing Center," international students feel an enormous pressure to produce "correct" work (6). Specifically, they become more concerned with editing and precision vs. critical thinking and establishing one's purpose in a piece.

One way to channel students' creativity is spending time on the topic of passion. Ask questions – What lights your fire? Why is this important to you? Why is it worth sharing? Can we learn from your experience(s)? As Patterson says, "If you are not passionate about it, don't write it." This notion also lends itself to the term "healing leadership." According to Sturnick, the notion simply means learning from one's past, and that healing can take many forms, such as "emotional, spiritual, intellectual, or physical" growth. We then take this newfound insight, good or bad, and apply it to our daily lives (186).

In terms of packaging this theory in an ESL / Writing Center setting, many students have never had the opportunity to express their stories, which have included female genital mutilation, genocide, refugee camps, and even torture. By taking time to encourage the heart and listen actively, passion ensues (Dubrin 303-304). When students are excited about their writing, the overwhelming fear of grammatical correctness subsides, at least temporarily, and this is when tutors and tutees can work on the bigger picture, which includes purpose, examples, organization, voice, and, of course, multiple drafts (Enders 6).

Transform Lives through Reflection

Lastly, and spring boarding off of encouragement, is promoting the idea of reflection. Taking a cue from Sempai-Kohai mentoring, which is the Japanese model where both parties learn equally, a mentor and protégé should actively listen and guide one another (Dilworth 243). The duo could include an administrator and Writing Center Director, the Writing Center Director and tutor, the tutor and tutee, and so on. Premeditated dialogue, which encourages differing viewpoints, requires the following:

- The conversation should encourage questions, not hardened solutions.
- Speakers should add ideas, not argue over them, contributing to the bigger picture.
- The group should create multiple interpretations of perspectives, focusing on inclusivity.
- Multiple intelligences, such as the usages of drawings or videos, could assist those needing clarification of assumptions (McAndrew 135).

The bottom line is always the same. That being, great unions don't just happen. "They are built by leaders who take specific actions to help people come together as a team" (Daft 295). And while every team has a functional hierarchy, otherwise known as a chain of command, a successful Sempai-Kohai mentorship always keeps the lines of communication open. What will work for one Writing Center will not work for another, and what learning pedagogy will work for student x will not gel with student y. In the end, a common goal (better writing) and constant interaction (listening, sharing, and revising) greatly influence a team's (Writing Center) cohesiveness (Daft 295).

Conclusion

Starting any new task is difficult. In the case of starting an ESL based Writing Center from scratch, one must look at the practical issues, such as staffing, size constraints, and location, but also the administration's expectations, cross curriculum concerns, and recognizing the rhetorical

needs of ESL speakers (Patterson). With too many unintentional and ethnocentric cooks in the kitchen, the task can seem overwhelming at times. However, by building upon McAndrew's key principles, which include creating a vision, being a model, experimenting, nurturing competence, encouragement, and transforming lives through reflection learning, it is hoped that such a writing facility will not only survive but thrive (141).

Diversity, in terms of the student population and ideas on how a Writing Center should be ultimately organized, enables us to see that we are all needed (DePree 72). We all bring a variety of gifts to the workplace. When we are allowed to contribute these talents, such as rethinking the traditional model of the one-size-fits-all model of instruction/mentoring, flexibility ensues. And like a domino effect, when creativity flourishes, all members of the collective Writing Center community succeed.

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Here is the definition of a dangling modifier in English grammar as well as some examples to aid in understanding. Purdue OWL says that to fix dangling modifiers, it's helpful to first explore how a modifier should read in a grammatically correct sentence, giving this example: Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV. This sentence is correctly composed because Jill is the subject, and the phrase having finished the assignment describes Jill. By contrast, a sentence with a dangling modifier might read: Having finished the assignment, the TV was turned on. In this sentence, the phrase having finished the assignment is the dangling modifier. topic: DANGLING MODIFIERS 1 - Identifying dangling modifiers | level: Advanced. Choose whether each of the following sentences is CORRECT, or whether it has a DANGLING MODIFIER: 1. Unlike many other students, the financial aid office did not approve his application. Correct dangling modifier. Correct dangling modifier. 5. Drinking a beer, the feeling was a familiar one. Correct dangling modifier. 6. While watching a movie, people who talk loudly are really annoying. Dangling modifier correct. 7. While listening to the radio, one should always make sure that the volume is not too loud. Dangling modifier correct. 8. At the age of sixteen, I moved back to California. Dangling modifier correct. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept. Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV. "Having finished" states an action but does not name the doer of that action. In English sentences, the doer must be the subject of the main clause that follows. More examples of dangling modifiers and their revisions: INCORRECT: After reading the original study, the article remains unconvincing. REVISED: After reading the original study, I find the article unconvincing. INCORRECT: Relieved of your responsibilities at your job, your home should be a place to relax. REVISED: Relieved of your responsibilities at your job, you should be able to relax at home.