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THE LEARNING ASSISTANCE REVIEW

Journal of the National College Learning Center Association

National College Learning Center Association

About *The Learning Assistance Review*

The Learning Assistance Review is an official publication of the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA). NCLCA serves faculty, staff, and graduate students in the field of learning assistance at two- and four-year colleges, vocational and technical schools, and universities. All material published by *The Learning Assistance Review* is copyrighted by NCLCA and can be used only upon expressed written permission.

Contents

Letter from the Editors

With great honor and pride, we accept the "editorial torch" from our predecessors: Jeanne L. Higbee, Irene M. Duranczyk, and Emily Goff. Their editorial team brought much to *The Learning Assistance Review* (*TLAR*) and, in turn, to the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA). We thank them for their effort, dedication, and commitment to our profession. They are an impressive team to follow.

We hope to build on their solid foundation and vigorously escort this publication into a new era. We wholeheartedly support the NCLCA board decision to provide members with digital access to past issues of *TLAR*. We are excited about the opportunity to include *TLAR* as part of EBSCO Publishing, which delivers full-text and bibliographic research databases to the school, public, academic, medical, corporate and government library marketplace. EBSCO Publishing currently licenses the full text of over 8,000 periodicals and databases that are offered as collections in more than 40 products and successfully marketed worldwide. Progress is also underway to join ERIC databases in full text format, allowing global access for those university libraries that have subscriptions. Stepping into the Internet and the electronic world of print will build our membership, provide a forum for international connections, and promote scholarly dialogue world-wide.

Just as learning assistant centers must always stay in the leading edge of technology and provide a strong hand to extend to those who are struggling to make that leap, we (as *TLAR* editors) are eager to provide a similar support to potential authors, so our publication and association can step forward. Our goal is to reflect that commitment in our editorial process, our cover, and our content.

With that mission in mind, we have been quite busy building an electronic substructure that will facilitate the necessary evolution of procedures and policies. Starting with this edition, we have:

- created a unique *TLAR* e-mail address for submissions and communications (tlareditor@lourdes.edu)
- updated the forms so they are "user friendly" in an electronic format
- revised the manuscript submission guidelines
- created an electronic database for processing manuscripts
- implemented mandatory electronic submission and reviewing procedures

This streamlined process has many benefits. Authors benefit because they receive *one* report with all the reviewers' rankings and comments consolidated in one document. They also receive their electronic manuscript returned with all the reviewers' contextual comments embedded throughout text. The

editors benefit because authors make their revisions on that same document and return it electronically. As a result, the publishing system is smoother, cleaner, and more efficient. So far, the response has been wonderful, as indicated in the following unsolicited (but welcomed) comment: "This has been an amazingly smooth process, with excellent feedback and faster turn-around times than are typical for many journals - thank you!"

To echo TLAR's step into a new digital dimension, we have re-designed the cover. The design honors the past but incorporates the future.

The excitement that electronic literacy generates, however, pales next to our pledge to promote this publication as a venue for enthusiastic scholarship that takes a leadership role in determining best practice in our discipline. *TLAR* has an excellent tradition of publishing reputable cutting-edge scholarly articles that help direct our profession. We vow to maintain that level of excellence. As such, we are tweaking the "Join the Conversation" section of the journal to highlight research that builds upon those articles published in *TLAR.* More details of these changes are outlined within that section of this edition. Further, we urge potential authors to consider all four types of articles that can be submitted for publication: reports of empirical studies, review of articles, theoretical articles, and methodological articles. We will reinforce APA guidelines for each, including the important element that, just as in empirical studies, those other article types must include a new contribution to the discipline. For instance, articles can present the following: a new theory or pointing out a flaw in an existing one, a new methodology that will benefit learning centers, and an article review that clarifies a specific problem.

We are just like new parents, tentatively presenting our "newborn" to the world. We are excited, eager, and if the truth be told, filled with a touch of trepidation. With support from the awesome NCLCA membership, we are confident *TLAR* will flourish in this new medium as it has flourished in the print format. When the time comes, once again, to pass the "editorial torch," *TLAR* will be well established in the digital age.

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Predicting Mathematics Learning Center Visits: An Examination of Correlating Variables

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Abstract

This study, which explores factors that motivate developmental mathematics students to seek available assistance with their coursework, showed statistically significant correlations between the number of math learning center visits and various variables. An interaction effect was revealed between mathematics confidence and years of college enrollment. The data suggests that younger college students are less inclined to seek mathematics learning center assistance than returning adults and that students with high levels of mathematics confidence are less inclined to proactively seek academic assistance. The data suggests learning center coordinators might consider exploring ways reach out to these targeted areas to develop solid academic skills.

I n this era of increasing needs and diminishing resources in developmental education, finding ways to target our efforts to engage students in proactive learning processes is critical. The reality that many college students fail courses without ever seeking assistance through a learning center is frustrating indeed. Can learning center professionals predict which students are likely to visit learning centers? How do factors such as the age and prior college experiences of the student, confidence level and perceived importance of mathematics, current course enrollment and enrollment history correlate with use of a mathematics learning center? Are there interaction effects between any of these variables? This article aims to answer these questions using empirical data.

Background

Research has long suggested favorable connections between peer tutoring and academic success in a variety of disciplines, including college mathematics. Positive associations between consistent peer tutoring, retention, test scores, and grades in mathematics have been established in multiple studies across a wide range of age groups (Gribbons & Dixon,

2001; Heintz, 1975; Reitz & McCuen, 1993; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989; Xu, Hartman, & Uribe, 2001). The benefits of peer tutoring have even captured the attention of the National Science Foundation. As part of a reform initiative targeting general, organic, and biochemistry, the National Science Foundation has given its support to a peer-guided learning system known as Workshop Chemistry (Lyle & Robinson, 2003).

Studies of the motivating and inhibiting factors affecting mathematics students offer a complicated glimpse of potential tutee motivation. A comprehensive mixed methods study by Thomas and Higbee (2000) examined the correlations between attendance, questionnaire responses, and final grades in algebra and pre-algebra and revealed that:

> Regardless of gender, race, or learning environment, two factors were consistently associated with achievement: attendance and academic autonomy, which reflects students' interest in learning for learning's sake. . . . What makes these findings so important is that so many other variables were examined, yet it was attendance and students' attitude toward being involved in the learning process were [sic] the two that emerged as significant to student success (p. 229).

These findings are right in line with Schwartz's (2006) assertion that to achieve success in mathematics, class attendance is a critical but not exclusive requirement. Schwartz contends that seeking outside assistance, either by visiting a tutoring center or accessing faculty office hours, is necessary. Such outside assistance may, in turn, support the other two requirements for mathematics success cited by Schwartz: analyzing written course materials and completing homework problems.

Several researchers have found that students' attitudes toward learning can be positively influenced through peer tutoring. Berry (2002) describes a program in which elementary school children who were paired with older students for assistance with mathematics and reading skills development exhibited increased motivation and positive changes in their study habits. Fotoples (2000) argues that peer tutoring can be a successful tool in alleviating math anxiety, a common challenge faced by students of all ages, at all levels of learning.

As a developmental mathematics educator and Math Resource Center Coordinator at Alverno College, I am interested in examining the factors that motivate or encourage developmental mathematics students to seek widely available assistance with their coursework. Specifically, I am interested in identifying factors that correlate with student use of the Math Resource Center (MRC), an on-campus, drop-in center offering peer tutoring in mathematics. This article explains a statistical examination of such factors.

Method

Research Questions

It is critical to consciously avoid generalizations and assumptions about developmental mathematics students, both on my own campus and on

college campuses across the United States. Students arrive in our classrooms with a medley of life experiences, goals, and time constraints, linked to a variety of advisors and support programs. While such diversity is certainly a cause for celebration, it can complicate even the most well intentioned learning center outreach efforts. If learning assistance centers could somehow focus outreach efforts toward students who might not otherwise pay a visit, learning center coordinators could fulfill the old adage of working smarter, not harder.

This goal leads directly to three research questions. First, can learning center professionals predict which students are likely to visit learning centers? Second, how do factors such as the age and prior college experience of the student, confidence level and perceived importance of mathematics, current course enrollment and enrollment history correlate with use of a mathematics learning center? Third, are there interaction effects between any of these variables?

Data Collection and Analysis

To address these research questions, a ten-question survey was distributed to all developmental mathematics students at Alverno College in Spring of 2006. A total of 527 surveys were distributed to the 12 teachers of 35 course sections, based upon initial enrollment numbers. Teachers administered these surveys during class in all 35 sections. A total of 364 surveys were returned, representing more than a 69% response rate. If unofficial withdrawals and official course drops completed by students between the initial enrollment date and the survey response date could be reasonably quantified, the response rate would likely be even higher.

Initially, six simple analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine possible correlations between mathematics learning center visits and six parameters individually. Based upon anecdotal experience, students often do not remember the exact number of times they have visited the learning center. Because of this, students were asked to categorize their math learning center visits from 1 ("I never visit the MRC") to 6 ("I visit the MRC 10+ times per semester"). This range of mathematics learning center visits was compared to parameters including the respondents' number of years completed at Alverno College, years since high school graduation, mathematics confidence level, current mathematics course, number of completed college mathematics courses, and perceived importance of mathematics.

Next, a two-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests was conducted to examine the number of mathematics learning center visits in relation to both students' mathematics confidence and high school graduation year. Students' responses to the question, "How would you rate your confidence using mathematics?" were divided into three groups. The first confidence group (N=8) included all responses of 1 (never confident) and 2 (seldom confident). The second confidence group (N=40) included all responses of 3 (sometimes confident). The third confidence group (N=293) included all responses of 4 (often confident) and 5 (always confident). Students' high school graduation years were divided into two groups. The first year group (N = 159) included all high school graduation years prior to and including 2002. The second year group (N = 182) included all high

school graduation years since 2002.

Finally, a two-way univariate ANOVA was conducted to examine the number of mathematics learning center visits in relation to both students' reported mathematics confidence and the number of years enrolled at Alverno College. Students' responses to the question, "How would you rate your confidence using mathematics?" were divided into three groups as described above. The first confidence group (N = 8) included all responses of 1 (never confident) and 2 (seldom confident). The second confidence group (N = 40) included all responses of 3 (sometimes confident). The third confidence group (N = 305) included all responses of 4 (often confident) and 5 (always confident). Students' responses to the question, "Including this year, for how many years have you attended Alverno College?" were divided into three groups. The first group included first-year students (N=282), the second group included second-year students (N=48), and the third group (N=23) included students enrolled for three or more years.

Several assumptions were made in designing these tests. First, the number of reported MRC visits was assumed to be normally distributed within each cell. Second, population variances among survey respondents within each group were assumed to be identical. The null hypotheses for the one-way ANOVAs were that there are no statistically significant correlations between Math Resource Center visits and any of the six variables surveyed. The null hypothesis for first two-way ANOVA test was that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of Math Resource Center visits based upon either students' reported confidence using mathematics or their high school graduation year. The null hypothesis for the second two-way ANOVA was that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of Math Resource Center visits based upon either students' reported confidence using mathematics or their number of years enrolled at the college.

Results

Statistics obtained via each one-way ANOVA are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Reported MRC Visits Compared Individually to Six Variables

Variable	Effect	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Signif-icance
Years at Alverno College	Between groups	18.361	5	3.672	7.539	.000
	Within groups	172.428	354	.487		
	Total	190.789	359			
Years since high school graduation	Between groups	4.241	1	4.241	8.580	.004
	Within groups	171.035	346	.494		
	Total	175.276	347			

Table 1 Continued

Variable	Effect	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Signif-icance
Mathematics confidence	Between groups	5.586	1	5.586	10.845	.001
	Within groups	182.355	354	.515		
	Total	187.941	355			
Current mathematics course	Between groups	.990	2	.495	.932	.395
	Within groups	182.717	344	.531		
	Total	183.706	346			
Mathematics courses completed	Between groups	6.776	3	2.259	4.373	.005
	Within groups	184.365	357	.516		
	Total	191.141	360			
Perceived importance of mathematics	Between groups	1.874	2	.937	1.773	.171
	Within groups	189.267	358	.529		
	Total	191.141	360			

As depicted by significance values, there are statistically significant correlations between the number of math learning center visits and the following variables individually: years at Alverno College, years since high school graduation, mathematics confidence, and the number of mathematics courses completed.   In these four instances, the null hypotheses were rejected. Significant correlations do not exist, however, between the number of math learning center visits and either students' current mathematics courses or their perceived importance of mathematics.

Statistics obtained via a two-way ANOVA with math learning center visits as the dependent variable and both mathematics confidence and years since high school graduation as independent variables are presented in Table 2.

As this data reveals, there is little if any effect between mathematics confidence and years since high school graduation with respect to math learning center visits ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Corrected model	7.394[a]	5	1.479	3.014	.011
Intercept	112.244	1	112.244	228.770	.000
Years since HS graduation	.840	1	.840	1.711	.192
Mathematics confidence	3.321	2	1.660	3.384	.035
Years since HS graduation * Mathematics Confidence	.165	2	.082	.168	.846
Error	164.366	335	.491		
Total	839.000	341			
Corrected Total	171.760	340			
[a] R Squared = .043					

Statistics obtained via a two-way ANOVA with math learning center visits as the dependent variable and both mathematics confidence and years enrolled at Alverno College as independent variables are presented in Table 3. As this data reveals, there is a correlation between mathematics confidence and learning center visits ($p=.014$), and there is also a correlation between years of enrollment and learning center visits ($p=.001$). Even more interesting, there is an interaction effect between mathematics confidence and years of enrollment ($p=.022$). The null hypothesis, in this case, is rejected.

Table 3

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Corrected model	19.266[a]	8	2.408	4.931	.000
Intercept	125.973	1	125.973	257.957	.000
Years enrolled at Alverno College	6.530	2	3.265	6.686	.001
Mathematics confidence	4.220	2	2.110	4.321	.014
Years enrolled at Alverno College * Mathematics Confidence	5.685	4	1.421	2.910	.022
Error	167.992	344	.488		
Total	887.000	353			
Corrected Total	187.258	352			
[a] R Squared = .103					

Discussion

The variables significantly correlated with mathematics learning center visits are interesting, as are the variables *not* correlated with use of the learning center. Consider the finding that students who graduated from high school more than five years ago are more likely to visit the mathematics learning center than students who graduated from high school within the last five years. This statistical finding may suggest that life experience leads students to access academic support services more readily than less experienced peers. Indeed, research has shown that interactive learning experiences including peer tutoring sessions pair well with the experiential learning methods preferred by many adults (Lawrence, 1988).

The impact of experience may also account for the finding that the number of college mathematics courses completed is significantly correlated with mathematics learning center visits, while there is no significant correlation between students' current mathematics courses and their use of the learning center. Apparently, accrued mathematics experience is a more significant factor in deciding on academic support than a student's current mathematics course itself.

Not surprisingly, students with three or more years of enrollment at the college are more likely to visit the mathematics learning center than first-year or second-year students. As all students enrolled in a developmental mathematics course at Alverno College receive information about the math learning center directly from their course instructors, this disparity cannot be attributed to lack of knowledge about the facility. Rather, the data might suggest that students with looming graduation dates are more willing to access academic support than students for whom graduation is a distant vision. More surprising is the finding that students' perceived importance of mathematics is not significantly correlated with mathematics learning center visits. Might this suggest that students are focused upon graduation as the end goal, rather than their post-graduation aspirations? A follow-up study could potentially investigate this question.

The finding that low mathematics confidence is strongly correlated to mathematics learning center visits should make learning center professionals pause. Of course, many learning center professionals hope that all students will access their services and make a particular point of encouraging students who express a lack of confidence to visit their learning centers. However, this correlation suggests that students with high mathematics confidence may, in fact, be avoiding such services. Clearly, the attention of learning center professionals is needed to convey the message that learning centers also welcome *confident* students. On-campus advertising and recruiting efforts should be conducted with this caution in mind, carefully avoiding what may be perceived by savvy students as deficit-model approaches to learning assistance.

The statistics revealed by the two-way univariate ANOVAs become clear when examined graphically. While Figure 1 does not indicate an interaction effect, it depicts the correlation between mathematics confidence and learning center visits, as described above. This figure also suggests that older students are more likely to visit the mathematics learning center than younger students with the same mathematics confidence level.
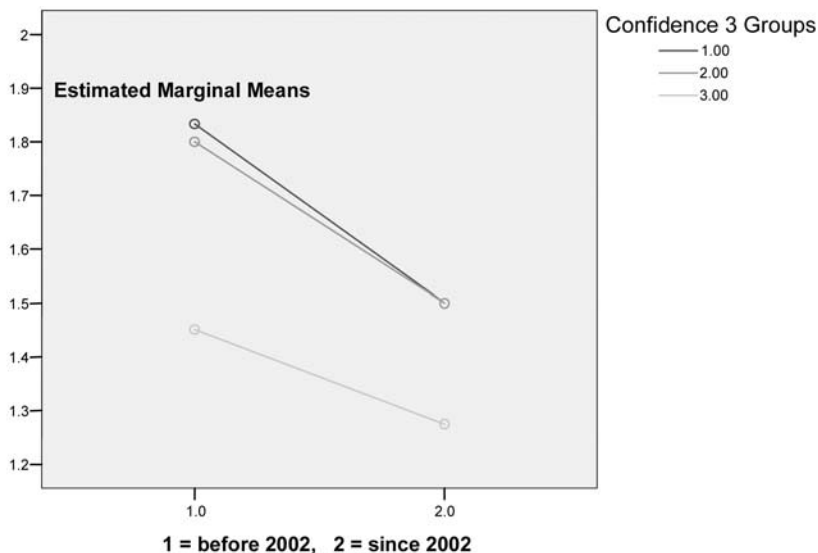
Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of MRC visits: confidence level of active college students

On the other hand, Figure 2 visually confirms the finding that students who completed high school 5 or more years ago are more likely to visit the Math Resource Center than are students who completed high school within the past five years. Also, the data shows that students with lower confidence levels are more likely to visit the Math Resource Center than are students with higher confidence levels, regardless of years elapsed since their high school graduation. The fact that the lines intersect suggests an interaction effect, where a combination of low mathematics confidence and third-year or higher student status correlates strongly with use of the mathematics learning center.

The reality of the intersection between low confidence and upper-class student standing as variables correlated with learning center use offers several implications for learning center professionals. First, it suggests that many students may still view learning centers as venues for receiving deficit-model instruction. Students with low confidence may feel that visiting a learning center is appropriate for "fixing" their math skills, whereas students with high confidence may avoid learning centers out of a belief that their mathematical understanding doesn't need "repair." Second, these findings imply that many students view learning centers as facilities for serving discrete and immediate needs, rather than as facilities for developing broad and long-term skills. Students with three or more years of college attendance are likely much closer to graduation than their less experienced peers, provided that they successfully complete their general mathematics requirements. Students with upper-class standing, then, may be driven by a sense of urgency rather than by refined study habits to visit the learning center.
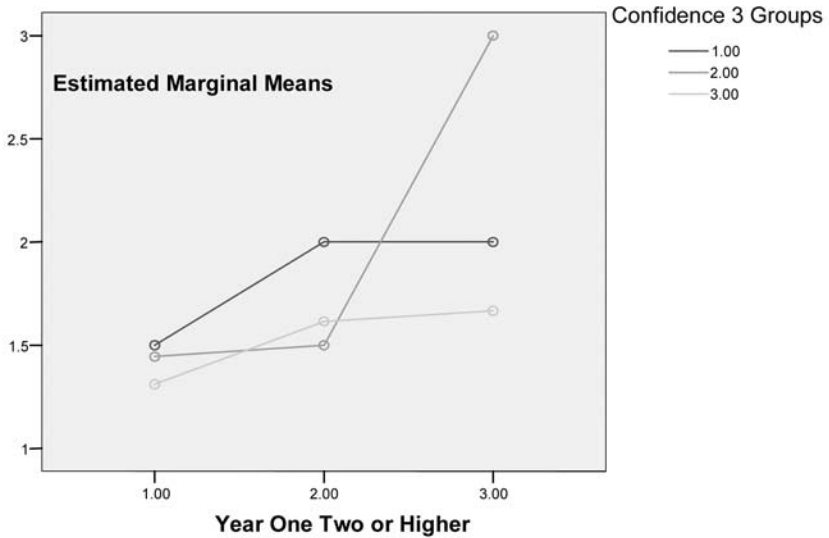
Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of MRC visits: confidence level of entering students

These findings are not surprising. The Math Resource Center has long battled the "stigma" within the student body that the center serves only developmental students. Despite the fact that the Math Resource Center serves students across the mathematics curriculum of the college and is serving higher numbers of upper-level mathematics students now than it ever has, younger students still seem to connect accessing academic services with admitting deficiencies. It may be that younger students have a more exaggerated sense of confidence in developmental mathematics courses than do returning adults. In the teaching experience of the author, younger students are less likely to sense the early stages of academic difficulties than are older students. Older students, in contrast, seek these services more eagerly. Ironically, the ability of older students to sense these difficulties quickly may contribute to both their willingness to seek academic assistance and to their lower confidence levels.

Conclusion

The effect of experience, including academic experience specifically and life experience in general, on students' willingness to seek academic support warrants further exploration. A future study into the relationship between life experience, academic experience, and use of academic support services might lead to findings useful to learning center professionals and mentoring program directors.

Meanwhile, this study serves as a reminder that learning center professionals should remain diligent in reaching out to the youngest, least experienced students. Learning center professionals might consider seeking ways to help the student populations on their campuses temper their often high confidence and develop solid academic skills. All students stand to

benefit from accessing academic support services. Hopefully, by sharing research and practice with one another, learning center professionals can find new ways to draw in these students.

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Connecting Theory to Practice: Evaluating a Brain-based Writing Curriculum

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Abstract

This 10 week longitudinal evaluation study evaluated a brain-based learning curriculum proposed by Smilkstein (2003) by comparing student performance in a traditional basic writing curriculum with NHLP-oriented basic writing curriculum. The study included two classes each of experimental and traditional methods. Results of the data, gathered by means of questionnaires and in-class writing, indicate the experimental classes expressed more positive comments than the traditional classes, and, on an enjoyment scale, tended to score higher mean Likert scores; but low N-size inhibited statistical testing and weakens the claim. However, scores for the final writing were statistically significantly higher for experimental students.

Connecting theory to practice is considered a helpful and necessary component of successful developmental education programs (Boylan, 2002; Casazza, 2003; Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Chung, 2005). Theory not only provides an explanation for practice but enables reflection and thus development (Griffee & Gorsuch, 1999). However, as Saxon and Boylan (2003) point out, theories need to be empirically investigated to determine which hold promise. Brain-based learning theory and its resulting curriculum, as discussed by Smilkstein (2003), provide one theory currently of interest.

Background

Smilkstein (2003) referred to her work in learning theory as Natural Human Learning Process (NHLP), which included five assumptions. First, the brain is conceived as an organ that actively constructs knowledge. Second, teaching means giving students the opportunity to actively learn. Third, if students fail to comprehend and apply knowledge, it is because they need additional background and preparation, not because they lack the ability to understand the material. Fourth, the pedagogical sequence is "the teacher should first give students opportunities to be active learners; then the

teacher, if necessary, can add to what the students have discovered on their own by giving a lecture, definitions, background, technical terms, explanations, examples, demonstrations, and so forth" (Smilkstein, p. 4). Fifth, learning is pleasant when students have had a chance to actively learn, as compared to a more traditional understanding that asserts learning is pleasant when the teacher is pleasant and the material is entertaining.

Working within the tradition of second language acquisition, Ellis (1998) discussed task evaluation and proposed a three-part evaluation model: student-based, response-based, and learning-based evaluation. Student-based evaluation gathers data about student opinion, response-based evaluation gathers data on the extent learning took place with students doing exercises under direct instructor supervision, and learning-based evaluation gathers data on the extent to which learning took place without direct instructor supervision. This evaluation model provides multiple evaluation paths that can result in a more complete view than any single view can provide.

Research Questions

The purpose of this 10-week longitudinal evaluation study was to evaluate a brain-based learning curriculum by comparing the performance of students in a traditional basic writing curriculum with those in an NHLP-oriented basic writing curriculum. Three research questions were developed, one each from student-based evaluation, response-based evaluation, and learning-based evaluation:

1. From a student-based perspective, did students in the NHLP classes find the curriculum more enjoyable than students participating in the traditional curriculum? If Smilkstein is correct that learning is pleasant when students have a chance to learn actively, this study should indicate students in the NHLP classes expressed more enjoyment than by students in the traditional classes.

2. From a response-based perspective, will students from NHLP classes complete their writing assignments and receive higher cumulative scores than students in traditional classes? If students are actively involved in their own learning and writing, this study should reflect those students will take more responsibility for their assignments, complete them on time, and thus obtain higher total scores than students in a traditional writing curriculum.

3. From a learning-based perspective, does an NHLP curriculum result in equal or better student writing scores than scores from a more traditional curriculum over one semester? If students in a NHLP-oriented curriculum are actively constructing knowledge, the resulting writing scores would be at least equal or, perhaps, surpass the writing scores of students in a more traditional curriculum.

Description of Smilkstein Model as used in this study

According to Lalicker (2001), traditional basic writing curriculum is defined as a below college-level, not full-credit course for writing at the paragraph level designed to prepare students for academic discourse, typically using lectures and grammar exercises. According to Smilkstein (2003), NHLP basic writing curriculum is defined as the same as the traditional curriculum with

the following modifications: All writing is evaluated using a midterm assessment and is introduced using an NHLP writing workshop format. The NHLP format used in this study consisted of four parts, with each part having three stages.

In part one, students worked individually and wrote down what they did during the 30 minutes before class. In the second stage, students worked in pairs or small groups and read their narratives to each other. The third stage consisted of looking at the similarities and arriving at a definition of a narrative with the instructor writing all contributions on the board without comment.

In part two, students again worked individually and wrote from when class started to 30 minutes before class started. For example, students would write sentences similar to "I sat down in my seat; just before that, I came into the room." In the second stage, students worked in small groups and read their narratives to each other; they were encouraged to change their definition if they thought it could be improved. Students were also asked to identify words or phrases they wrote that showed movement in time going forward or backward. Finally, with the instructor writing the transition words on the board, students worked as a whole class to report changes in their definition of narrative and what words or phrases they used to show movement in time.

In part three, students were given a handout of an example narrative text by the instructor and asked to individually to write notes about the author's time sequence and the use of transitions. In stage two, students worded in small groups and shared discussed their notes. In stage three, students working as a whole class were asked to write their findings on the board. The instructor lectured points as seemed appropriate.

In part four, students were assigned as homework to write a narrative of their own choice based on their experiences using transitions to help readers follow the movement through time backwards and/or forwards.

Method

Participants

I taught four basic writing courses used in this research. Two were randomly selected for the NHLP curriculum and two for the traditional curriculum. Classes were selected so as to balance day of week and time of day. The study began with a total of 37 students, 18 in the traditional classes and 19 in the NHLP classes, and ended week 10 with a total of 23 students, 10 in the traditional classes and 13 in the NHLP classes. The average age of all students was 21; the youngest was 17 and the oldest was 29. Students in the classes using the traditional curriculum were one African-American, five Caucasian, one Hispanic, and three international students from Thailand, Viet Nam, and Cameroon. Students in the classes using the NHLP curriculum were one African-American, six Caucasian, two Hispanic, and two international students, one from Korea and one from China.

Instruments

To answer research question one, an enjoyment questionnaire was designed consisting of one open-ended item and one closed-ended item. The open-ended item was "In terms of what we actually do in class, what do you enjoy or not enjoy about our class?" The close-ended item was a Likert scale of one to six in which one and two were designated as not fun, three and four were designated as so-so, and five and six were designated as enjoyable. The item was stated as "Circle the number that best shows overall how much you enjoy this class." The questionnaire was administered after the completion of each of the four writing modules: narrative, descriptive, comparison and contrast, and persuasive. Students were instructed not to sign their name, but to fill out the form and put it on a chair near the door as they left the room.

To answer research question two, points and due dates were designated for all assignments, and a late policy was published in the syllabus that stated assignments could be handed in no more than one class late. Each student was given a point sheet, and points were entered as writing was received on a duplicate point sheet kept in the class folder. Reflective letters, response papers, brainstorms, writing plans, and first drafts were given full point credit if they were completed on time, but final drafts were graded by the instructor. Scores thus reflect to a large extent the degree to which students submitted material on time.

To answer research question three, a prompt was given to all students requiring an in-class, persuasive essay of at least one paragraph.

Data Collection and Analysis

The enjoyment questionnaires were collected, enjoy versus not enjoy comments were identified, and the number of positive comments were summed and divided by the number of students making the comments, resulting in mean frequency scores. Comments not relevant to the curriculum, such as "I don't enjoy writing," were not tabulated. Likert ratings were summed and divided by the number of students answering, which provided an average for each class. Students' points earned were entered into a computer spreadsheet on the last class day of each writing module, which resulted in four collection periods. Point totals were individually summed, and a class average was calculated.

In-class essays were collected and graded by the instructor using the grading criteria for persuasive writing as seen in Figure 1. To deal with instructor rater bias, all students were instructed to sign their composition on the back. In addition, four essays, one each from an African-American, a Caucasian, a Hispanic, and an international student were randomly selected from the NHLP classes, and three essays, one each from an African-American, a Hispanic, and an international student, were selected from the traditional classes. After rater training was conducted, these seven essays (three from men and four from women) were given to a second faculty rater to grade. Instructor scores and second rater scores were correlated, corrected for attenuation according to a formula from Brown (1996, p. 155), and reported as a reliability coefficient. This reliability coefficient demonstrates the degree to which the course instructor rated students in the traditional and NHLP curriculum classes consistently.

Grading standards for the final persuasive writing

1. Writing is within the genre. This includes four features:

♦ A topic sentence that clearly states the proposition and writer's stance toward it e.g., I think the city should pass an ordnance prohibiting smoking in public,

♦ reasons which are clearly and logically related to the proposition,

♦ evidence which supports the reason,

♦ and a conclusion.

2. Maintains paragraph unity. The paragraph must be coherent. For example, does the writing contain transitional phrases (e.g., first, second, next, on the other hand).

3. Has audience awareness. Audience awareness means the text is reader based, not writer based. Reader based text is from the reader's point of view which means the reader can understand the meaning. Writer based text is text which makes sense to the writer, but not to the reader. An example of writer based text is, "In conclusion the reason that this lesson is so important to me, is for, with in this one lesson there are many more to come."

4. Appropriate vocabulary. The vocabulary is appropriate for academic use, and is not speech-based that contains slang or conversational phrases.

5. Mechanics. Mechanics refers to fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, or misspelled words.

Grading scale:

It's all there = 20 points.

It's mostly there = 15 points.

Some is there = 10 points.

A little is there = 5 points.

Nothing to grade = 0 points.

Figure 1. Grading standards for the final persuasive writing

Results

Research question one was addressed by the frequency of positive and negative comments as shown in Table 1 and the Likert scale ratings as shown in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 1, the NHLP classes began by making fewer positive comments than students in the traditional classes (3.80 to 6.00). After week 5, both groups seem about equal, but by the end of week 7, the NHLP classes were making more positive comments. This trend continued through week 10.

Table 1

Average Frequency of Positive and Negative Comments

Collection period	NHLP positive	Traditional positive	NHLP negative	Traditional negative
End of week 3	3.80	6.00	1.94	1.33
End of week 5	2.66	2.83	1.00	1.33
End of week 7	2.00	1.34	0.94	0.93
End of week 10	1.43	1.00	0.25	0.13

The Likert scale enjoyment ratings can be seen in Table 2. Both the NHLP classes and the traditional class scores start at about the same point, 4.59 and 4.78. At the end of week 5, the NHLP classes enjoyment ratings increased to 5.08 while the traditional class enjoyment scores decreased slightly to 4.71. By the end of week 7, both groups were the same, but by week 10, some difference reappeared. Of interest is the final standard deviation for both groups. Since standard deviation is a measure of how the scores group around the mean (Vogt, 1999), the standard deviations for week 10 indicate a higher level of agreement among students in the NHLP classes than in the traditional classes.

Table 2

Likert Scale Enjoyment Ratings

Collection period	NHLP classes		Traditional classes	
	M	SD	M	SD
End of week 3	4.59	1.42	4.78	.67
End of week 5	5.08	.90	4.71	.95
End of week 7	4.50	1.24	4.50	.93
End of week 10	5.00	.43	4.50	1.38

Research question two was addressed by students' earned points collected at the end of weeks 3, 5, 7 and 10, which can be seen in Table 3. These weeks were chosen because they were the final weeks of the four writing modules. The NHLP classes both scored writing score totals in the mid-four hundreds. One of the traditional classes also scored in the mid-four hundreds and one did not. This evidence is inconclusive and may or may not

indicate that a NHLP oriented curriculum motivates students to turn in their writing assignments.

Table 3

Cumulative Student Earned Points

Classes/Weeks	Week Three	Week Five	Week Seven	Week Ten
NHLP Classes				
MWF 9:00 am	80.1	195.0	313.4	469.2
TT II:00am	65.3	199.0	294.0	455.0
Traditional Classes				
MWF 10:00am	53.9	215.0	331.0	479.0
TT 9:30am	73.5	154.0	261.0	321.0

Research question three was addressed by the scores from the final essay as seen in Table 4. Rater reliability corrected for attenuation was .90, indicating high consistency between the scoring of the instructor and the second rater, which indicates that the instructor who rated the essays from all students was rating the essays written by the students in the control and NHLP classes in a similar way. The NHLP mean score was 82.92, and the traditional mean score was 71.61.

Table 4

Final Writing Average Scores

	NHLP	Traditional
N	13	10
Mean	82.69	72.00
SD	8.81	13.98
Minimum	70	50
Maximum	100	90
Skewness	.17	-.37
Kurtosis	-.64	-.78

After verifying that all assumptions for a t-test had been met, results of a one-tailed $\underline{t}$-test were $\underline{t} = 2.246$, df $= 21$, p $= .0178$. Strength of association calculated using Cohen's d was .77, indicating a fairly robust finding.

Discussion

Research question one was, "Will students in the NHLP classes find the curriculum more enjoyable than students in classes using the traditional curriculum?" The answer is a tentative yes, although the evidence is not conclusive. The experimental NHLP classes expressed more positive comments than the traditional classes, and on an enjoyment scale using Likert scale ratings, they also tended to score higher mean Likert scores than the traditional classes, but because of low number of students involved, no statistical comparisons were done which weakens the claim.

Research question two was, "Will students from NHLP classes complete their writing assignments in a way so to obtain scores higher than students in traditional classes?" Again, the answer is yes; two of the NHLP classes scored higher than one of the classes in the traditional curriculum. It must be pointed out, however, that one of the classes in the traditional curriculum also scored a high number of points indicating that more variables may be involved than this paper investigated. Nevertheless, these findings may be important because it suggests that an NHLP curriculum encourages students to complete and hand in their work which is a prerequisite for student writing improvement.

Research question three was, "Does an NHLP curriculum result in equal or better student writing scores than a more traditional curriculum?" The answer is yes; the NHLP classes scored an average of ten points higher than the classes receiving the traditional lecture curriculum. To put it another way, the average score obtained on the final writing by the students experiencing the traditional curriculum was a C while the average score obtained by students experiencing the NHLP curriculum was a B. This average score difference occurred despite a drop-out rate that left only determined students in both the control and experimental classes, which resulted in a high level of one-on-one teacher to student instruction in both control and experimental classes.

What factors in the NHLP curriculum promoted more student enjoyment, generated higher performance, and increased learning? After reviewing field notes kept during the semester, two reasons suggest themselves: the workshop methodology and the midterm formative evaluation. There was no difference between the control and NHLP groups with reference to the teacher, the way students were selected for the course, the day or time of the class, the types of writing, the method of grading, or practice in mechanical drills. The workshop methodology, on the other hand, was a major difference.

Each workshop began with an individual student task that provided data for the workshop. Stage one (individual) allowed every student to participate in a concrete rather than abstract way. Considerable student resistance at stage one (whole group discussion) occurred in one class when asked for their definition of a narrative. Students wanted a "correct answer" and insisted that they did not know the definition of a narrative piece of writing. This impasse provided an instance of teacher-student interaction. The instructor insisted on an answer until one or two students offered a few phrases toward a definition. Phrases were written on the board without comment. At stage two (the whole class), additional comments were added to the definition that made it more complete.

This study suggests the bottom-up recursive stages of the workshop promoted teacher-student interaction that allowed students to construct their own understanding of the writing process. This happened to a far lesser degree in the traditional curriculum classes, which rely primarily on lectures and present students with lectures resulting in minimal interaction.

The second major difference between the control and experimental groups was the midterm evaluation conducted at the end of week seven. Smilkstein (2003) gave detailed step-by-step procedures for what she calls "student

group instructional feedback," (p. 164). This study, however, is using the more traditional term: Midterm Evaluation (ME).

A teacher colleague agreed to come into the classroom and conduct the ME. Procedures were established, and a complete class session was allocated to the ME. The colleague came into the classroom, was warmly greeted to make it clear that the instructor was not being evaluated, and then the instructor left the room. The colleague posed three questions: what works, what doesn't work, and what could be improved? Students wrote their answers individually, shared in small groups, and then the answers were written on the board. A student volunteer transcribed all the answers, and the colleague led a whole class discussion and asked if there was agreement on all the points under the three questions. This last point ensures that the answers are a class consensus rather than a collection of idiosyncratic points. The colleague collected the transcriptions and a day later gave them to the instructor along with her understanding of what happened.

In the class immediately following the midterm evaluation, the results were discussed and clarification sought of the issues raised by the transcribed answers. It was found that what worked was the brainstorming and writing plan assignments. What did not work can be grouped under four categories: student misunderstandings, unacceptable requests, idiosyncratic points, and requests concerning instruction and feedback.

An example of student misunderstanding occurred in their request for more interesting writing topics. This was a misunderstanding because the instructor never assigned writing topics but only agreed to provide students with topics if they could not come up with a topic themselves. Elimination of peer evaluation represented an unacceptable request. One idiosyncratic request slipped through the midterm evaluation. In one class, students requested more grammar lessons, but when quizzed on this point, it was found that while one student made the request and the other students agreed during the midterm evaluations the class later acknowledged they did not agree although they said so at the time. A final suggestion was a request for more feedback from the instructor and more direct instruction on writing.

For the remainder of the course, the number of required drafts was increased from two to three. Draft one underwent peer evaluation and received full points if turned in. Draft two was evaluated by the instructor and would also receive full points. Draft three was graded by the instructor based on the criteria in Figure 1. These changes met the concerns of the students, increased feedback from the instructor to all students, and allowed for more direct instruction.

Implications and Further Research

As a result of this study, I am no longer willing to present writing genre in lecture format. However, in recent graduate level classes which include ESL students, there have been requests for lectures, and I may have to decide time, form, and content of classes. Perhaps the role of lecturing and its place in classroom instruction is more complex than first imagined and future research could help.

The evidence here suggests lecture fronted instruction is not as helpful as NHLP instruction. Should lectures be eliminated in favor of various forms of class discussion? Smilkstein (2003) herself indicates that there might be a place for lectures after students have had a chance to engage in active learning. This suggests that it is the active learning which prepares students to more fully grasp the lecture content. Reversing the format of lecture-discussion to discussion-lecture could be a future research area.

Another research area for future research is the function and role of mid-term evaluation (more traditionally referred to as formative evaluation). As the results of this study show, the trend of all evaluation indexes was down until formative evaluation and the steps suggested by that evaluation were taken. Formative evaluation takes into account that teachers have blind spots and cannot see certain areas of student concern. This study strongly suggests that student input and feedback can make a valuable contribution.

Conclusion

In summary, the midterm evaluation produced formative evaluation data that allowed an "interactional" dialogue between the instructor and the classes and, in turn, resulted in curriculum changes. The midterm evaluation apparently had a rejuvenating effect on the NHLP classes as reflected in the Likert scale approval ratings in Table 2 and the cumulative score differences in Table 3. In both cases, after week seven, scores reversed their downward direction and rebounded substantially.

This empirical evaluation study comparing a brain-based writing curriculum based on Smilkstein (2003) with a traditional writing curriculum produced evidence to suggest that a brain-based curriculum is promising to composition teachers. Despite a very high drop out rate (typical for developmental education courses at this institution), the data from this study provides evidence that over a period of time, a NHLP curriculum provided higher student approval ratings, increased participation, and improved student writing scores.

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What Writing Center Conference Summaries Reveal about Writing Center Practices and Principles at Work

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Abstract

This article describes an examination of writing center practices and principles through a qualitative study of 1,611 conference summaries prepared during one semester. The ensuing discussion refines understanding the relationship between tutoring sessions and the reporting mechanisms they serve. The summaries reveal that almost half of the students were unable to articulate what type of writing assistance they were seeking. The study considers the importance of educating faculty about the purpose and function of writing centers and provokes questions about the alignment of writing center practices with goals, purposes, and principles.

The following study resulted from considerations about the relationship between what students expect when they come to a writing center for assistance and what they "get" when they arrive. The study was framed by practices at the University of Toledo's Writing Center and was formulated by principles and procedures of tutoring at this institution.

The University of Toledo Writing Center website (2005) purports to offer assistance to writers "to generate ideas, organize notes and thoughts, and receive feedback on drafts or completed papers" (Welcome, ¶ 1). Its stated purpose is to "is to provide writers with transferable skills" which transcend a specific assignment and thus are intended to be of long term assistance in "future assignments." For these reasons, writing center tutors "do not proofread or evaluate papers" but instead "work collaboratively with writers, reading student texts and offering questions and suggestions to help guide revision and proofreading" (Welcome, ¶ 1-3). The philosophical foundations of these stated goals are consonant with principles about student empowerment from contemporary writing theory and comparable to the functions and operations of writing centers throughout the country.

However, theoretical goals are not always as well understood by student users as by the administrators who craft them, nor are the goals always

satisfied in actual practice. Additionally, established practices of providing service may be sustained as routines even if they do not serve useful purposes.

Background

Conference summaries, reports prepared by tutors at the conclusion of writing conferences, were well established practices prior to this study. At the completion of a writing conference session, tutors completed a checklist form to identify the kinds of assistance a student requested and then summarized what actually occurred in the tutoring session. These documents were used to provide records (numbers of students served, kinds of writing projects, length of session, focus of work, etc.) which had been used for accountability and budget allocation purposes. However, because summaries consumed significant resources of time and space (e.g., tutor preparation of each summary, director review, clerical copying and distribution to faculty, and storage of records in office cabinets and archival boxes), their value as accountability measures was questioned. Nonetheless, these conference summaries appeared to be able to offer useful information for exploring the tutoring process.

Furthermore, the work of a writing center is seldom fully appreciated, often misunderstood, or sometimes dismissed as limited in scope or function, population served and outcomes achieved. As Richard Leahy (1990) recognized, "faculty and students have differing notions about what a writing center is" (p. 43). The minimal response from faculty to a brief Writing Center survey sent directly to them suggests the lack of widespread faculty investment in Writing Center operations.

Only 13 faculty responded to the survey distributed in Fall 2004. (Though response nearly doubled in Spring 2005—27 respondents—those remarks are not discussed here because the conference summaries examined were only from Fall 2004; the Spring 2005 responses were nonetheless consistent with the results of the Fall 2004 comments.) Of 13 faculty who responded to the Fall 2004 survey, nine reported their students had used the writing center that term, two stated their students had not used the center, and two did not know. Seven of the nine faculty whose students reportedly visited the writing center stated they had suggested generally to the class to do so, six had recommended the writing center, and two required their students to make an appointment. Eight respondents stated they typically read conference summaries to learn more about the kinds of assistance their students requested or received, two said they discussed the conference summaries with their students, and one reportedly filed it. Seven reported that they noticed some improvement in their student writing, four reported a change in the student's attitude, two remarked about changes in a student's participation, and two reported no evident or apparent change—though one of these respondents did not know whether his or her students had visited the writing center. One commented, "They [students] go in scared. You have made the process very friendly and safe. They come out appreciative. Your help has also saved me a lot of work" (Nelson-Burns).

Despite the Writing Center's faithful reporting of conferences, the minimal information obtained from faculty about the impact of writing center services on student writing led to other means of obtaining information about the

tutoring sessions. Yet, examining tutoring sessions directly is problematic, due in large part to the intrusive nature of such an investigation, which in itself could skew or manipulate the interaction between tutor and student. For these several reasons, an examination of conference summaries was initiated to learn what would be revealed by reading the documents holistically. Initial interests were to determine what insights would emerge about how tutors interacted and the direction of tutoring sessions and about whether these reports served purposes productive enough to warrant maintaining the practice. Sections of the conference summary relevant to this study appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Writing Center Conference Summary

Did the writer bring an assignment prompt?		Yes		No	
Writer requested assistance with:		Tutor's Report of the Writing Conference:			
1. CONTENT					
• Understanding the writing assignment					
• Reading text					
• Formulating a thesis					
• Explaining and developing ideas					
2. ORGANIZATION/FORMAT					
• Organizing information in a logical pattern					
• Connecting ideas cohesively					
• Presenting information in expected format genre					
• Understanding academic conventions of writing					
3. STYLE					
• Adopting tone appropriate for situation					
• Selecting words precise for context					
• Constructing varied sentences					
• Engaging rhetorical devices/strategies effectively					
4. LANGUAGE/EXPRESSION					
• Eliminating fragments, run-on sentences					
• Using punctuation correctly					
• Spelling common words correctly					
• Using appropriate grammar and/or syntax					
• Adopting protocols of English-language writers					
5. RESEARCH Protocols/CITATION					
6. OTHER					

Method

Conference summaries prepared during fall semester 2004 were collected and examined. These summaries constituted the entire record produced during that term. Each summary contained an initial identification of anticipated or requested help that the student wanted as well as a summary statement of what the tutor and student worked on during a 25 or 50 minute session. Although the categories in which help was requested were standardized, tutors' summary comments were not so clearly uniform. Thus, categories of help provided were established from emerging patterns which became evident through multiple readings.

Tutors' summarized recounting of students' requests ranged from broad to narrow. Some examples included a range from: "student wanted to know how to write a literature review" to "student needed help using online research database." Some requests were general: "Needed help deciding on a research topic", while others were quite specific: "Had trouble with usage of 'their' and 'there'."

Results

In all, 1,611 conference summaries were examined. A compilation of students' requests for assistance is presented Tables 2 and 3 and discussed below.

Table 2

Comparison of Students-Identified Purpose for Writing Center Visit

Student identified specific area for assistance during visit	Student did not identify specific area
890 requests for specific help (55%)	721 visits (45%)

In over half the visits, the student asked for assistance in one of the five identified areas: content, organization, style, language/expression, or research and citation protocols. However, in nearly half of the tutoring sessions, the student came to the Writing Center without stating any specific area in which assistance was being sought. The three areas in which assistance was most frequently requested are identified in Table 3.

Table 3

Student-Identified Areas of Requested Assistance

Type of Assistance Requested	Percentage of assistance requested
Content	29%
Language/expression	27%
Organization	23%

Although nearly one third of the students (27%) asked for assistance with language matters, report summaries indicate that students were not concerned solely with grammar. In fact, there were more requests for help in the area of content. And, as one tutor pointed out, for a lot of undergraduates, "grammar" represents everything they *don't* know. So, if

asked, "What can I help you with today?" students may say, "grammar" when they mean anything from research protocols to style. This explanation may also apply to and account for why faculty, particularly those outside English/writing-related fields, likewise identified "grammar" as an area in which they expected writing center tutors to assist their students' improvement, as discussed below.

In fact, students requested assistance most frequently (29% of the requests) for matters that could be categorized as "content." The second highest area of assistance (27%) requested related to language/expression. Organization/format matters were a close third (with 23%). Many students came to the writing center because they wanted help understanding or dealing with their instructors' directions. This pattern was surprising because this specific request was not anticipated; it was the kind of question one would expect to be directed, instead, to a course instructor. That students asked for this type of help indicates the need to question how writing center staff might pragmatically assist faculty in assignment design, and how tutors can be trained to adequately address the needs of students unable or unwilling to obtain clarification from their instructors.

The category "Style" related to issues which were not grammatical in nature, but with eloquent expression of ideas, so "style" was used to refer to sentence-level issues. (For example, a comment like, "Helped student revise some awkward sentences," would fit under this category.) "Organization/format" referred to paragraph-level issues, though this sometimes included clear verbal expression. While both "style" and "organization/format" refer to clarity in general, "style" refers to the clarity of individual sentences, while "organization/format" refers to the clarity of the work as a whole because organization/format problems necessitate rearranging ideas, while stylistic issues require rearranging or changing individual words.

Discussion

Students sought help in matters related to content more so than in any other area. This is a positive indication that writers are indeed attending to global issues of their texts as a fundamental focus of writing. Ironically, students' requests for help are not necessarily what faculty themselves identify as areas in which their students needed help. Faculty responding to the request for feedback identified seven areas in which their students needed specific help from writing center tutors, ranked from most frequently identified to least frequently: review of a draft, assistance with editing and revision, recommendations for organization and development, helping to develop a response, grammar, citations, and research. The contrast in expectations hints at different emphases among faculty and students as to what features of a writing product most need subsequent work and attention in order to become an improved piece of writing. It may also suggest that faculty themselves are not well versed in what work writing tutors actually do when working with students, or that not all faculty are themselves certain what specific areas of assistance are needed to most improve a student's paper.

That 45% of the writing tutoring sessions took place without the student having identified an area or aspect of writing in which he or she needed or wanted assistance indicates these writers were uncertain of what they

hoped to achieve from a writing center appointment. A number of students had stated verbally that they came to the Writing Center because their instructors required that they do so, as confirmed in faculty feedback. Requiring writing center tutorial assistance has elicited different responses from student writers; some welcome the supportive assistance while others resist tutors' guidance and resent their instructors' insistence that they make an appointment at the center. Mandating tutoring, in turn, raises questions about the effectiveness of a service to which students are assigned, as well as about instructors' perception of the tutor's role in relation to the work of the classroom teacher.

Another explanation for the large number of students who did not report a reason for seeking help or an area in which help was requested is that these students did not know how their writing might be improved. Such passivity underscores the absence of what Elbow (1981) argues writing programs and platforms must help writers achieve: "power [that] comes from the words somehow fitting the *writer* [*sic*] (not necessarily the reader)…power [that] comes from the words somehow fitting *what they are about* [*sic*]" (p. 280). Writers who have a clear idea of the kind of assistance sought before beginning a writing tutoring session are more likely to find a tutoring session positive and productive. Empowerment comes, as Cooper and Odell (1999) state, when students are guided to view their writing critically: "If students are to learn how to respond helpfully to a written text, especially if they are to help assess a text's strengths and weaknesses, we'll have to spend class time teaching them how to do this" (p. xi).

The difference between what faculty expected their students to achieve and what students identified suggests that writing centers need to continue efforts to educate faculty about Writing Center purposes and the values that are brought to a writing tutoring session. More effective methods of communicating Writing Center goals and purposes need to be explored in order to establish more successful working relationships with these important campus partners in order to uphold the Writing Center's published belief that "writing is a recursive activity involving several steps that include generating ideas, organizing thoughts, developing a first draft, rewriting, and editing"(*Mission*, ¶ 2).

Based on the study's results indicating so many students came to the Writing Center without a clear and evident purpose for their visit, the sign-in procedures were changed. That is, prior to this study, when students arrived for an appointment, they "signed in" by providing demographic and course-specific details—year in college, major, course for which they sought tutoring, etc. As a result of this study, students were also asked to review the areas identified on the tutor's summary form and check areas in which they wanted assistance prior to the session's start. The purpose of this very simple change in procedures was to promote at least brief reflection on their writing and to consider areas in which a tutor might provide assistance. The intent was to provide a means of developing and promoting the empowerment of which Elbow speaks.

Implications

This study prompted a re-examination of the Writing Center's mission statement, professed purposes, and reporting practices. Because budget

allocation is driven by productivity and utilization reports, reporting Writing Center use has been measured by numeric calculations (e.g., numbers of students), and its support is linked to its relationship with faculty. However, since the Writing Center's primary purpose is to serve the writers themselves, practices which strengthen that essential relationship need to be augmented. In order to realize the values expressed in the University's Writing Center website, policies and practices must work together to empower the writer, without sacrificing the Writing Center's important relationship to the faculty whose support must be enlisted. Specifically, in order to provide the long-term assistance ascribed to, means must be crafted to support the Writing Center's assertion that it "provid[es] the opportunity for writers to maintain ownership of their own papers" and assist them to "learn to use the vocabulary, organization and format specific to the academic discipline in which they are writing" (*Mission*, ¶ 3). Then, the Writing Center's philosophies of a "non-directive tutorial style" (*Mission*, ¶ 4) by which tutors "serve as an audience instead of as editors or proofreaders" can be more widely recognized, expected, and respected (*Mission*, ¶ 5).

Additionally, preparing conference summaries for faculty must be reconsidered. This practice implies that it is the faculty member who has the sole right to learn about tutoring sessions, and thus is presumably the one who benefits from learning about it. If the practice of preparing conference summaries is sustained, it should include sharing the summaries first and foremost with the writer. To do otherwise bypasses the primary recipient of Writing Center services and denies the writer the written record of interaction which might serve to prompt reflection, increase the effectiveness of writing conferences, and promote empowerment. In these ways, the Writing Center will increase its responsiveness to the needs of student writers and affirm its role as a critical player in promoting sustainable skills.

The evident need to aid students to effect ownership of their writing and thus relinquish the instructor's authority over their texts can only be addressed by designing practices which promote this. Guiding students to become reflective through the language of self-evaluation engages them in assuming responsibility for their writing products, thus changing the dynamic of a student's approach to writing center assistance and increasing a tutor's effectiveness. Re-enforcing students' awareness of and responsibility for the linguistic choices they make—that is, their own strength and weakness—will assist the writer, the tutor, and the instructor to each work in concert more effectively. In the process, students will be less likely to see the writing center as a fix-it shop and more likely to see it as a workshop—a place to discuss ways to manipulate language and focus on features of writing specific to the writer's intended purpose.

Further Research

The data collection purposes and method presented in this study may serve as a prelude to examinations of procedures and practices in other campus-based student support services. Such an investigation generates new considerations for how to evaluate writing centers' effectiveness in serving students' needs. This kind of study may be of help to both writing center personnel (administrators and tutors) as well as to composition instructors as they jointly work to support student learning.

To date, the effectiveness of tutoring services has typically been measured by correlating student project or even course grades with the provision of tutoring assistance. This correlation assumes a quantitative and short-term gain is not only identifiable, but is the expected, preferred result. Such an approach disregards and even contradicts the basic principles of learning theory that are the foundation to developing strong writing skills. Thus, other ways of assessing the value of writing center assistance must be developed which are consistent with and support sound principles of writer empowerment.

The qualitative approach employed in this study might be replicated in other centers which keep similar records. The concept of reviewing documents of this nature may also prompt writing center directors to consider models that will more effectively review their practices, modify policies or procedures for greater effectiveness, and address the need for collaborative support of student learning that partners writing centers and classroom instructors in more open dialogue.

In fact, if conference summaries are used only for the minimally productive purposes now in place, they should be abandoned altogether to conserve tutors' time for interaction with student writers and to preserve the anonymity of a session which is not now being reviewed for substantive ends.

Conclusion

Finally, the present practices of measuring outcomes and reporting writing center usage must be reconsidered and brought in line with the values each learning center espouses in its mission statements, goals, and affirmed values. During her long tenure as advocate of Writing Center pedagogy and presence, the late Muriel Harris (2001) described the fundamental purposes and practices of writing center tutor-student interactive engagement with the writer's text:

> Students also come in [to the Writing Center] because of cases of writing apprehension or lack of confidence about their writing skills. The tutor's job is to work with the whole person—her abilities, concerns, and writing history, as well as her paper—to establish a comfortable interaction within which the student and tutor can work productively together. The all-important collaborative relationship a tutor aims to create permits students to learn more effectively, to take a more active role in the conversation, and to ask the kinds of questions they hesitate to ask teachers for fear of appearing inept or just plain stupid. (¶ 2)

To achieve this goal, writing center administrators must better understand what the student writer actually brings to the writing center conference and how records of the interaction should be used.

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Join the Conversation

For this journal to be viable, it must breathe your thoughts, reflect your theory, identify your problems, and share your triumphs while promoting scholarship in our profession. We enthusiastically announce that "Join the Conversation" now has a new two-pronged format to encourage active collegial scholarly dialogue.

Idea Exchange:

This is a new addition to "Join the Conversation;" it is designed to provide a site for further discourse on the journal's contributions. If an article touches on a program you have been trying to start, an issue you have been grappling with, or sparks an idea, we have created a forum for brief academic discourse (less than five paragraphs). For instance, if your experience with brain-based writing curriculum corroborates the information presented in Griffee's article in another area, this is the place you can share it with the readers. If, on the other hand, the "further research" discussion in that article created an interest in conducting a follow-up empirical study, but you would like to collaborate with a colleague, this is the platform to discuss it, network, and connect. Consider this section of *TLAR* as a catalyst for building the first stages of collegial study. Submission guidelines are outlined both in the Pertinent Publishing Parameters section of the journal and on the web, where an Idea Exchange submission form will be available.

Further Research:

This segment now highlights follow-up research based on previously published *TLAR* articles or NCLCA conference presentations. Building on the idea exchange section, this segment will publish articles motivated by discussion for further research including any of the four types of articles. Featuring a clear connection from one published article to the next systematically builds scholarship in our field. It encourages real dialogue through research and creates best practice in our profession. Continuing with the same example presented in the Idea Exchange, if your manuscript submission is a response to Griffee's article, clearly identify that connection for the readers. Build on his initial research in the continuum that is research; it is the opportunity for dialogue through scholarship.

Similarly, if a book review inspired you to create a pilot, change a procedure, augment a training, your work based on that reading will

also be featured in this "join the conversation" section. Remember there are many different types of articles that *TLAR* will accept that address our purpose: to publish scholarly articles and reviews that address issues on program design and evaluation, classroom based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching and tutoring strategies, student assessment, etc. Addressing these issues is not limited solely to empirical study. *TLAR* will review all four types of articles outlined in *The American Psychological Association Manual*: review of an empirical study, review of articles, discussion of theory, and presentation of new methodology. The details for acceptance for each of those types are outlined in the Pertinent Publishing Parameters section.

Our goal is to encourage our entire readership participation. It is time to "join in the conversation."

Please send your comments and/or article submissions to: tlareditor@lourdes.edu.

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BOOK REVIEW:
How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper

Lipson, C. (2005) *How to write a BA thesis: A practical guide from your first ideas to your finished paper.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Christine Reichert, Lourdes College

Writing is always a daunting task regardless if it is a beginning student struggling with a five-paragraph essay or a seasoned professional preparing a manuscript for publication. There is a plethora of excellent publications to help both the beginner and the professional, but publications are sparse for that in-between student who is not quite a professional and certainly is no longer a beginner. Charles Lipson has identified one specific audience from that in-between category: undergraduate writers required to complete a BA thesis, a capstone project for their college career. No doubt, students at this level have written plenty of course assigned research papers, reflective essays, and critiques, but writing a major research project with this level of independence, depth, and importance is an entirely different experience. The prospect of this task often thrusts students into a self-imposed opportunity to flounder. *How to write a BA thesis: a Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper* is a no-nonsense guide that speaks directly to students, provides a valuable timeline guide for the whole process, and reinforces effective writing techniques. Because it is a logically well-presented guide that prepares students for successful navigation through those un-charted territories, it has the added potential to be an exceptional learning assistant center tool for providing supplemental support.

This 400 page book is divided into eight main sections that, as might be expected, parallel well established steps for writing: "Getting Started," "Framing Your Topic," "Conducting Your Research," "Writing Your Best," "Working Your Best," "Scheduling and Completing your Thesis," "Dealing with Specific Requirements," and "Citing Your Sources and Getting More Advice." However, one of the elements that set this guide apart is its first chapter: "How to Read This Book." This chapter provides a clear seven-month timetable, including which chapters to read in the first two months, the middle three months, and the final month. The timetable also includes the most essential deadlines: picking an adviser, completing the proposal, conducting research and rough drafts, and reserving one full month for editing and polishing the document. The section "Dealing with Specific Requirements," includes

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an adjusted timeline for students who have one semester (instead of one year) to complete the thesis. Although the book is written for students, the last chapter—all three-and-a-half pages—is written directly for faculty (specifically new advisers) on how best to use this guide to help students through the process. One excellent feature is the highlighted key points, labeled as "tips" throughout the chapter as well as the quick "checklist" at the end of each chapter with bulleted items. As a result, regardless of students' inclinations—whether to read it cover to cover, scan the tips, or just look at checklists—they can still benefit from the guide.

Lipson's guide echoes traditional, established writing techniques including the steps for writing, but it does so with language that students will grasp, rather than throw it in the corner as "one more dry, boring, complicated textbook that says lots of technical words that I don't understand and directions that I know I'll never do." For instance, in the chapter on taking efficient notes and avoiding plagiarism, Lipson uses a conversational tone when he sets up the section about taking time to think about what one reads. "That's as true for faculty as it is for students. After ninety minutes poring over an article, we close the journal with relief and go directly to the next task, or more likely, stroll out for a well-deserved pizza" (p. 39). This relaxed tone, peppered throughout the guide, is clear—not condescending. It speaks collegially to the student, more as a conversation than as a lofty or dense text. The conversational voice is sustained throughout because Lipson consistently uses second person pronouns, speaking directly to the student reader.

Yet, the material and suggestions are dead-on. The section on how to prepare for the first and subsequent meeting with an adviser gives both useful suggestions and supportive rationale. For example, Lipson suggests the importance of coming to the first meeting prepared because it will benefit the student in two ways: the student will be relaxed and the busy faculty member's time will be productively used. Lipson suggests students prepare a packet for that first meeting that would contain essential pertinent information (such as the student's contact information, required college-forms, a list of courses taken, copies of related research papers, any special background experience or motivation) plus some preliminary thesis topic ideas (pp. 20-21). Lipson also provides students with motivation for preparing the packet that students may not have considered when he stated: "This packet not only answers essential questions; it shows the professor you care about the subject and are organized and ready to move forward. The professor can review the materials quickly, and you can begin a useful conversation immediately" (p. 21). This type of discussion benefits both the reluctant student and the student who may think of a BA Thesis as just one more research paper without the constraints of a class. Because students are often clueless to the difference between course-based and capstone research projects, it is not unusual for them to assume the faculty/adviser will take charge. The guide effectively eliminates that misconception by placing all the responsibilities squarely on the student's shoulder and clearly identifying the roles of adviser and student throughout the research project.

As such, the guide has an ancillary benefit: it is an excellent administrative tool to assure continuity and uniformity for the process. Advisers know what to expect require; students know what to do. Because this guide includes examples across the disciplines, it has great potential to be used as a tool

to provide a benchmark for assuring students receive consistent scholarly support throughout the various departments, divisions, and schools in a college or university.

Lipson keeps the student focused on assuring academic honesty and scholarship, particularly in the section on quoting or paraphrasing without plagiarizing. His examples include precise identification of both poorly and efficiently executed embedded sources. What sets this section apart from textbooks is the manner in which the examples are presented: He reduces the paraphrase/quoted samples all from one sentence: "Joe Blow was a happy man, who often walked down the road whistling and singing" (p. 49). The table gives six correct and eight incorrect quotes/paraphrases of this sample sentence with explanations in an opposing column why it is or is not correct. Because the table is visually easy to read and understand, it has a higher chance of connecting with the student writer. These samples also reinforce the importance of the writer's voice in using sources as supportive documentation.

One weakness in the guide is the section that suggests students determine their courses throughout their academic career with the capstone thesis in mind. While the concept is uncontroversial, it just makes sense to systematically plan ones courses and research papers with the capstone project in mind, it is not necessarily a realistic suggestion. Realistically, the majority of students will not look at this guide until the last possible moment, maybe the end of their junior year or the beginning of the senior year (which seems to coincide with timeline within the guide itself). By that time, course choices are a thing of the past. However, this information might be useful in the adviser's section, as a tip to help guide the student with the capstone project always as a long-range goal from the first course choice onward. Also, the information could placed in the section that addresses completing this project and overcoming "senioritis" as a segment for forward planning or transition into graduate school. By the time the student is reading this chapter, much of the writing process is complete and the student may better understand in hindsight how that suggestion would be of benefit.

This guide has an exciting potential: the possibility of becoming an instrument for learning assistance centers to develop corroborative supplemental programs with academic departments. Because Lipson repeatedly indicates the importance of learning and writing centers for students in all steps of the writing process, administrators can straightforwardly demonstrate how the guide can link with academic disciplines to provide a cohesive learning assistance package for these capstone projects. The guide is a natural conduit for learning centers and/or writing centers to provide a series of BA thesis writing workshops that parallel the suggested critical writing stages in the guide. There is excellent potential for using the key research milestones outlined in the guide as a basis for providing supplemental workshops in a learning center. The students would benefit by not only processing the information within the guide but also participating academic support system.

This guide can be an invaluable tool for reinforcing scholarly research. It sets high standards of academic rigor and then shows students how to achieve those standards. The guide, while written specifically to address genuine student issues in writing a BA thesis, it has a potential for far more.

The opportunities abound for using this guide as a unifying element on many levels: between student and adviser; between faculty advisers within one academic department, between academic departments and learning centers and/or writing centers, and between academic departments and administration. It has a strong potential to be an integral part in a college-wide student success program.

Pertinent Publishing Parameters

The Learning Assistance Review (*TLAR*), the national peer reviewed official publication of the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), publishes scholarly articles and reviews that address issues of interest to learning center professionals (including administrators, teaching staff, faculty and tutors) who are interested in improving the learning skills of postsecondary students. Primary consideration will be given to articles about program design and evaluation, classroom-based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching and tutoring strategies, student assessment, and other topics that bridge gaps within our diverse profession.

Categories for Submission

Articles:

- ♦ **Topics:** *TLAR* will accept manuscripts that address our purpose: to publish scholarly articles and reviews that address issues on program design and evaluation, classroom based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching and tutoring strategies, student assessment, etc.

- ♦ **Types:** *TLAR* will accept manuscripts following all four of the article types outlined in the American Psychological Association Manual: empirical study, and articles on review, theory, and methodology. Follow APA manual (chapter 1.4) for specific requirements and structure for each type; regardless, all manuscripts need a clear focus that draws a correlation between the study, review, theory, or methodology and learning assistance practices.

Joining the Conversation:

- ♦ **Idea Exchange:** Discussion directly related to articles published in *TLAR*. A more formal and in-depth extension of professional list-serves that provides a forum for networking on ideas that impact learning assistance. Submissions are limited to less than four paragraphs and are to be constructive idea exchanges. In addition to the name, title, college and contact information from the submitter, Idea Exchange submissions are to include the details of the referenced article (title, author, and volume/number, and academic semester/year). A submission form may be found online on the *TLAR* website.

- ♦ **Further Research:** Article submissions that have a stated direct link to prior published *TLAR* articles. These articles will be considered following the manuscript submission guidelines.

Book Review:

- Book review requests should be accompanied with two copies of the book to facilitate the reviewing process.
- Potential book reviewers are urged to contact the editorial team for details.

Manuscript Guidelines

- Manuscripts and reference style must be in accordance with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Submissions that do not comply with APA style will be returned to the author(s).
- Manuscripts must be original work and not duplicate previously published works or articles under consideration for publication elsewhere.
- The body of the manuscript may range in length from 10 to 20 pages, including all references, tables, and figures. Longer articles will be considered if the content warrants it.
- The authors are responsible for the accuracy of all citations and references and obtaining copyright permissions as needed.
- The only acknowledgments that will be published will be those required by external funding sources.

Submission Guidelines

- Submission packets must include: a cover page, the original manuscript, a masked manuscript for review. One hard copy of these materials must be mailed to the address listed below and an electronic copy submitted to the e-mail address listed below.
- The title page must include the title of the manuscript (not to exceed 12 words); the name(s) and institutional affiliation(s) of all authors. The lead author should also provide work and home addresses, telephone numbers, fax, and e-mail information. All correspondence will be with the lead author, who is responsible for all communication with any additional author(s).
- The second page should be an abstract of the manuscript, maximum 100 words.
- To start the reviewing process, the lead author will be required to sign certificate of authorship and transfer of copyright agreement. If the manuscript is accepted for publication, all author(s) must sign an authorization agreement.
- Figures and tables must be black and white, camera ready, according to APA style

Please send your comments and or article submissions to: tlareditor@lourdes.edu with a hard copy to:

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Review Process

- ♦ Author(s) will receive an e-mail notification of the manuscript receipt.

- ♦ The review process may include a peer-review component, in which up to three members of the TLAR editorial board will review the manuscript.

- ♦ Authors may expect the review process to take around three months.

- ♦ Authors may receive one of the following reviewing outcomes: (a) accept with minor revisions, (b) revise and resubmit with only editor(s) review, (c) revise and resubmit for second full editorial board review, and (d) reject.

- ♦ As part of the reviewing correspondence, authors will be electronically sent the reviewers rankings and general comments on one document and all the reviewers' contextual markings on one manuscript.

- ♦ Manuscript author(s) must agree to be responsible for making required revisions and resubmitting the revised manuscript electronically by set deadlines.

- ♦ Manuscript author(s) must abide by editorial revision decisions.

- ♦ Accepted manuscripts become the property of the National College Learning Center Association and may not be reprinted without the permission of the NCLCA. Authors relinquish ownership and copyright of the manuscript and may only distribute or transmit the published paper if copyright credit is given to NCLCA, the journal is cited, and all such use is for the personal noncommercial benefit of the author(s).

NCLCA 2007 Conference

Learning Centers By Design
22nd Annual Conference
September 26 - 29, 2007
Atlanta, Georgia

This year's theme, "Learning Centers by Design," offers a wealth of possibilities for conference presentations. We hope to inspire your creativity. Taken broadly, "design" can encompass anything from creative publicity campaigns to innovative training programs to new ways of thinking about learning centers—see where inspiration takes you!

For more detailed information and the conference registration form, visit the NCLCA website at http://www.nclca.org/2007conference/home.htm

NCLCA Membership Information

What is NCLCA?

The National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA) is an organization of professionals dedicated to promoting excellence among learning center personnel. The organization began in 1985 as the Midwest College Learning Center Association (MCLCA) and "went national" in 1999, changing the name to the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), to better represent its nationwide and Canadian membership. NCLCA welcomes any individual interested in assisting college and university students along the road to academic success.

NCLCA defines a learning center as a place where students can be taught to become more efficient and effective learners. Learning Center services may include tutoring, mentoring, Supplemental Instruction, academic and skill-building labs, computer-aided instruction, success seminars and programs, advising, and more.

Join NCLCA

NCLCA seeks to involve as many learning center professionals as possible in achieving its objectives and meeting our mutual needs. Therefore, the NCLCA Executive Board invites you to become a member of the Association.

The membership year extends from October 1 through September 30. The annual dues are $50.00. We look forward to having you as an active member of our growing organization.

Membership Benefits

- A subscription to NCLCA's journal, The Learning Assistance Review
- Discounted registration for the Fall Conference and for the Summer Institute
- Regular issues of the NCLCA Newsletter
- Voting privileges
- Opportunities to serve on the Executive Board
- Special Publications such as the Resource Directory and the Learning Center Bibliography
- Opportunities to apply for professional development grants
- Access to Members Only portion of the website
- Announcements of other workshops, in-services, events, and NCLCA activities

Membership Application

On-line membership application or renewal available with PayPal payment option at: http://www.nclca.org/membership.htm. Contact Membership Secretary to request an invoice if needed.

OR

Complete the information below and send with your $50 dues payment to the NCLCA Membership Secretary. Be sure to check whether you are a new member or are renewing your membership. If you are renewing your membership, please provide updated information.

Please check one: ☐ New member ☐ Membership renewal

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