

Room to Write: Supporting Students Through Vanier's Writing Centre

HISTORY

The Writing Centre, based out of Vanier's Tutoring and Academic Success Centre (TASC), has been active for three semesters now, and it is consistently growing its resources and services.

While TASC does have peer tutoring services available, it had become clear that more was needed to help students with their writing skills. Some issues that students were having with writing surpassed what a peer tutor could effectively handle. Secondly, some students require direction when being tutored; in other words, some students respond and adopt information better when being told directly what is expected from them, rather than being tutored with a more questioning approach. Some students also prefer to have their questions answered by people with more writing expertise than a tutor could offer (Thompson, Whyte, Shannon, Muse, Miller, Chappell & Whigham, 2009, p. 82). As such, in Autumn 2017, The Tutoring and Academic Success Centre began a pilot project to develop a new service to help with student success: the Writing Centre. The goal was for TASC to work with three teachers from General Education to develop a model for the Writing Centre over the course of one semester, and then for the teachers to take on the role of writing consultants the following semester, working directly with students on their writing skills.

The three teachers selected, Vanessa Vandergrift from English, Jennifer Mitchell from Humanities, and Ruby Viray from Physical Education, along with myself as a member of the TASC team, researched various models of Writing Centres in colleges and universities in Canada and the US. It was at this point that the team created the centre's mission statement: "In support of the college's mission statement, the Writing Centre provides an environment that fosters the development of writing skills that lead to current and future academic and professional success. The Writing Centre seeks to support success in writing across disciplines through the development and implementation of writing resources, including workshops, the facilitation of individual and small group consultations, and the promotion of writing-related activities and events."

After meeting regularly, as well as requesting feedback and ideas from the Vanier community, the Writing Centre was ready to start offering its services in Winter 2018, providing writing consultations to students on a drop-in basis.

PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

The team opted to follow a model similar to what Stephen M. North (1984) called for in his notable essay, "The Idea of a Writing Centre,"

where the writing consultants work on helping the writer, and not just improving the text (p. 435). Rather than become an editing or proofreading service, the primary goal is to help students become better writers, to be more attentive to global issues in writing and written communication, such as the ideas, purpose, organization, and analysis (Thompson et al., 2009, p. 82). The writing consultants' role is to explore these issues rather than more local ones, such as grammar and sentence structure (Thompson et al., 2009, p. 82), which are issues that peer tutors can address. The focus of aid is on the writing process, which can include the purpose of the writing assignment, the audience, the organization of the ideas and the clarity of the analysis (Harran, Knott, & Weir, 2011, p. 1364). However, writing consultants will also offer a balance of feedback that addresses a student's grammatical concerns.

The second goal central to the Writing Centre's mission statement is the fact that it exists to serve all students, and not just students within a certain discipline (Grabow, 2013, p. 97). Having a centre that emphasizes the importance of writing and communication, regardless of the discipline, is necessary. Clear communication is valued in any field, and students are encouraged to visit the writing consultants with assignments from any class. In fact, in Winter 2019, a fourth teacher, Stephen Cohen from Physics, joined the team as a writing consultant, again highlighting the idea that writing is indeed valuable across all disciplines.

Each writing consultant spends five hours per week working one-on-one with students. The amount of time they spend with a student can vary from five or ten minutes to an hour. Some students simply need reassurance that they are on the right track with what they are writing, while others require assistance that is more involved. Students will often bring something they are working on, request feedback or assistance from a writing consultant, and then continue to work on it on their own in the Writing Centre, checking in with the writing consultant occasionally.

Some of the more common issues that students seek assistance with are organizing their thoughts, preparing outlines, incorporating analysis into essays, and grammar. While essays for English and Humanities classes are the most common type of assignments brought in, there is a wide variety of other types of assignments that students bring to the Writing Centre, such as reports and journals. The assignments come from many different disciplines and courses as well, particularly from Psychology, Early Childhood Education, Economics, Commerce, and Integrative Project. Students also visit with their



QUIET STUDY SPACE

WRITING SPECIALIST

QUIET STUDY SPACE

MAXIMUM GROUP SIZE: 4

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letters of intent for university and for assistance with their APA and MLA referencing. In order to address the high need for assistance in these two areas, the Writing Centre offers letters of intent workshops and regular citation clinics.

It is important that the Writing Centre is not seen solely as a remedial service. One of our mandates is also to promote writing as a pursuit to be enjoyed and celebrated. Along with the creative writing and academic writing contests already hosted by the Writing Centre, a new “Creative Writing in Science” competition was created in Winter 2019. A partnership has begun with Vallum, a local literary journal, allowing professional writers to facilitate creative writing workshops.

CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

There have been challenges to meet as well. While students appreciate the flexibility of having drop-in assistance available, there are situations where students require something more regular and scheduled. In order to address this need, we are planning on working out a system that allows for both drop-in and scheduled assistance. We also want to be able to help the largest number of students possible, particularly with the implementation of the SPLI (Student Proficiency in the Language of Instruction) policy. As such, we will be adding more human resources to the Writing Centre in 2019-2020, with writing consultants coming from each of the faculties of General Education, Science and Technology, and Arts, Business and Social Science. These writing consultants will be working in the Writing Centre for the entire academic year, offering the stability and consistency that is so important to the students (Sturman, 2018, p. 73), as well being more able to work on developing various writing resources, workshops and tools. Peer tutors will be better integrated into the Writing Centre and work more closely with the writing consultants; this will allow students struggling with expression or grammar the more accessible feedback that they need and are hoping to find (Moussu, 2013, p. 59).

As the Writing Centre moves forward, we look forward to collaborating with the Vanier community. We host regular open meetings for the Vanier teachers and staff to come and share their ideas, and we send surveys to collect feedback. We hope to work with more programs to better help and serve their students, as writing is a necessary skill for everyone’s success.

What People Have to Say

I found the writing centre to be a super resource for writers of all skill levels and for all parts of their work, paper, or essay. It’s a great help for students whose first language is not English, as well as students with strong writing skills will also benefit from the writing centre.
(Ruby Viray, Physical Education teacher)

It has been fun to leave the confines of Science and consider writing as an art. I enjoy working with students of all abilities and on content that spans the entire spectrum of courses offered by the college.
(Stephen Cohen, Physics teacher)

It’s amazing. You learn through one-on-one discussion, which is the best way to learn.
(Student, Anonymous survey response)

[What I appreciated most is] learning about grammar and the flow of my writing.
(Student, Anonymous survey response)



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