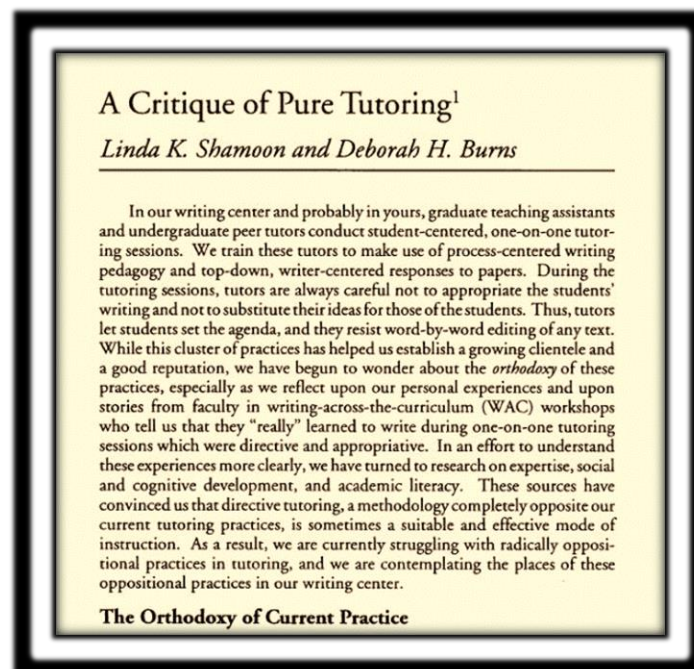


2021

Interchapter 1A

“A Critique of Pure Writing Center”: The Impetus for Innovation

Roberta D. Kjesrud, *Western Washington University*



About the Author

Roberta was a peer tutor, a staff supervisor, and a director at Western Washington University's Writing Center between 1988-2015. In 2015, she became the Director of Writing for Western Libraries' Hacherl Research & Writing Studio. The editors welcome communication about his piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

RECOMMENDED CITATION, APA 7TH ED

Kjesrud, R. D. (2021). “A critique of pure writing center”: The impetus for innovation. In R. D. Kjesrud, P. Hemsley, S. Jensen, & E. Winningham (Eds.), *Learning enhanced: Studio practices for engaged inclusivity* (pp. 1A.1 – 1A.8). Western Libraries CEDAR.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/learning_enhanced/21

This book is brought to you for free and open access by the Books and Monographs at Western CEDAR. It was accepted for inclusion in *Learning Enhanced: Studio Practices for Engaged Inclusivity* by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Don't get me wrong: most of what I've learned about teaching and learning I've learned in writing centers. But over some 30 years as peer tutor, staff, and director, I have also developed some sense we could do better. I've grown suspicious of a lore-based set of pedagogical practices benchmarked some 40 years ago—there's so much more we now know about how the brain works, how learning works, how students have changed, and how inequities persist. After twenty years of practicing the same pedagogies, I got restless. Gaps bothered me that I didn't know how to fix it. Eventually this dissonance led to our new studio and its signature pedagogies. But we wouldn't have innovated at all if we hadn't articulated the gaps, been open enough to investigate them, and taken action to improve based on information writers offered, some of it hard to hear. And so, with love, I offer my critique of pure writing center¹ paired with the innovations they prompted for the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio.

1. Although stand-alone writing centers are held as ideal, curricular and resource gaps disproportionately affect them.

Resource gaps affected our former Writing Center's reach in ways that good pedagogy couldn't fix. For instance, two weeks before the start of fall classes one year, our then-Provost called to arrange a visit. I was honored. I gushed about our program; he and his team prodded every corner of our space. I didn't realize his visit wasn't about us until I got a call that afternoon: he wanted our suite to house a new dean. We had ten days to move. Move where? Cue crickets. After daily nagging, I was offered a choice between a postage-stamp-sized room in a daytime-only building for administrators or a lean-to next to the parking annex. It got worse. In the two-year period that followed, we

¹ Special thanks to Linda K. Shamon and Deborah H. Burns (1995) for modeling a healthy skepticism of pedagogical orthodoxy in their inspirational article, "A Critique of Pure Tutoring."

were moved six times. Usage tanked; we were teaching writing to an empty room. Our itinerant circumstances got me questioning: How could we set up the program structurally for long-term security?

Innovation: Collaborate administratively in a learning commons—yes, there’s less freedom, but there is more advocacy and collective security, which is essential for our visitors.

2. Most students never visit a writing center, even when they practically trip over it.

I wanted a marketing silver bullet for this pattern, but I learned there wasn’t one through an assessment project. We didn’t ask users how to improve; instead, we asked non-users to help us understand why they were non-users. After talking to over 200 students, we noted two prevailing reasons: they didn’t have time, and they didn’t need help. Help. This objection resonates with me, since I turned down five home improvement store staff who asked me if I needed help on a DIY kitchen backsplash. Of course I needed help! But I didn’t know the name of the thingummies I would need, so I denied being helpless, until one asked: “What’s your project?” Now *that* was a question I could answer, and soon we were choosing all the right thingummies, grouts, trowel, sponges, and spacers. (My backsplash looks great!). Time. I write at the last minute too; I shouldn’t but I do. Faculty tut-tut over procrastination, but I too am writing syllabi the night before. What pedagogical practices will lower don’t-have-time and don’t-need-help barriers?

Innovation: Become a learning community, not a service point. Create a destination so appealing that students choose to learn there, whether or not they choose on-demand, appointment-free coaching.

3. Traditional pedagogies don't yield significant writing improvement.

In graduate school, I researched how final draft quality altered based on either teacher written feedback or multiple writing center consultations (see Buck, 1994). While teacher written feedback had no effect on first/final draft holistic ratings, writing center consultations had a slight positive but statistically insignificant effect. Most revisions were what I call cosmetic; that is, students fiddled with commas. These consultations should have been superior to ad hoc ones in several ways: consultants were deeply familiar with the course/assignment context, they met with the same writer across three visits, and the consultations were serial rather than one-shots. Yet even under these ideal conditions, writing quality didn't change and neither did critical engagement with inquiry. Why not? Of course, the arc of growth in writing and deep thinking is long. And perhaps students didn't put their best feet forward for many reasons. But what if our lore-based pedagogy was letting visitors down?

Innovation: Offer incremental micro-consultations where tutors assess visitors' strengths, scaffold a tailored strategy, and let visitors work the strategy on their own.

4. Writers didn't improve (much) either.

We've all heard the old song "I suck at writing." As lore would have it (see for example North, 1984), writing centers are concerned with writers, not just their writing. But in truth, like many, our writing center addressed higher order concerns, asked Socratic questions, and gave suggestions with scant concern that most writers lacked agency over process or secure writerly identity. Session transcripts revealed that few writers evidenced metacognitive habits of mind, and tutors seldom prompted visitors to evaluate what was working and what wasn't. When tutors coached process, they merely

described their own writing process, *sans* tailoring or scaffolding. Despite the writers-first encomium, our interventions prompted learning *about*, but rarely learning *how* or learning *to become*². In fact, I seldom heard learning goals beyond *better writers* (how offensive!) articulated in traditional pedagogy. How could we be so deficit-minded as to think there's something wrong with them, and when we treat them as if something is wrong, how could students overcome poor writerly identities to become lifelong learners/writers? Who would help them love (tolerate?) writing? Where would they gain process strategies tailored to their strengths?

Innovation: Using strengths, scaffold learning *about*, *how*, and *to become*: cognition, affect, process, and meta-reflection.

5. Lots of our practices benefited tutors more than visitors.

Although we did have drop-in slots, we mostly required appointments, especially at high demand times. If I were turned away when I was most desperate, I wouldn't return, either. Couldn't we offer something to everyone rather than everything to one or two? We took nearly an hour with writers, often reading drafts aloud to get us familiar. But what a waste of time for writers! When I told one writer we only had 20 minutes so I wouldn't have time to read the whole draft, they said something like, "Oh no worries, if it said what I wanted to, I wouldn't be here." Weren't they gently telling me that reading the draft was wasting their time? Then there's the 20 questions: what's your assignment, what have you done so far, when is it due, all things writers know already. Isn't there a shorter way I can get up to speed? There are other confusing boundaries: writers couldn't drop off papers, and we wouldn't proofread for them. But students drop off

² See [Chapter 2, "Studio-based Learning Pedagogy and Practices."](#)

their drafts online and check a box for grammar help. Then there's our comfortable, non-directive approach. As a tutor I don't like being bossy, but as a writer I like it less when responders always defer, "Well, how do **you** feel about that section?" Obviously, I hate it or I wouldn't have asked, so throw me a bone! And our space: tutors used it as their home away from home. They ate, slept, and chatted about private matters in clusters. Writers had to essentially interrupt a family gathering to ask for help—ten eyes stared at the newcomer. I'd run too.

Innovation: Become both host and guest in our learning community. As hosts, welcome students; as guests, cede control.

6. Collaborative writing project? Uh, we've got nuthin'.

Writing center pedagogy benchmarks one-to-one consulting, but writers work in groups far more often than our literature acknowledges. Some disciplines work almost exclusively in teams, and faculty struggle supporting the group process. Many instructors simply assign groups and let students figure out how to negotiate conflict, collective goals, and tough logistics. The Writing Center should have been the place that supported them, yet our space and practices were for tutor-writer dyads. Tables didn't seat larger groups, no accoutrements aided group process, there were no group appointments, no strategies unique to group writing, no shared screens—nothing welcoming to groups. We coached a few groups, often with just one member representing the team. Though based on collaborative learning theory, writing center practice accepts white-normed (Jones & Okun, 2001), one-to-one as the learning ideal. What practices should we feature for group consultations?

Innovation: Equip staff to coach groups in negotiating goals, conflict, and accountability as well as writing with a unified voice; create resources for student groups and offer embedded group consulting to faculty.

Are these innovations the last word in equity-based and evidence-based practice? Certainly not! We still have pain points, and we remain curious. That's why our gap-assessment-improvement loop is so helpful³. We joke that one of these years we will begin a new school year with stable, familiar practices. But five years in, there's still no time for comfort because our practices continuously evolve in significant ways. If writing centers don't deliberately assess to identify improvements, we will miss opportunities to question orthodoxies and improve learning. A single standard for *pure writing center* is probably not a thing, but if it is or ever was, there's no time for nostalgia. Learning means growing, not just for our students but for all of us.

³ See Chapter 5, [“Using Assessment to Prompt Innovation”](#)

References

- Buck, R. R. (1994). The effects on writing and revision of two different feedback methods: Teachers' written feedback and writing conference feedback [Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia]. <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0078074>
- Jones, K., & Okun, T. (2001). White supremacy culture. In *Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups*. Peace Development Fund. http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html
- North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English*, 46(5), 433–446. <https://doi.org/10.2307/377047>
- Shamoon, L. K., & Burns, D. H. (1995). A critique of pure tutoring. *The Writing Center Journal*, 15(2), 134–151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43441975>