

Linguistic Diversity as Resource: English Language Learners in a University Writing Center

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Abstract: In US colleges and universities, a growing number of English language learners (ELL) are using university writing centers for assistance. However, despite the increase in linguistic diversity among students, writing centers have been slow to respond to the needs of ELL students, approaching their language differences as problems to fix rather than resources for learning. Through an institutional case study, this paper describes how a writing center in a mid-sized, public university in the US has increased its support for ELL students and linguistic diversity through changes in staffing, staff education, and outreach.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the United States, and around the world, the number of English Language Learners (ELL) in institutions of higher education is growing. According to a recent joint report from the Institute of International Education and the U.S. Department of State (“IIE Releases Open Doors 2017 Data,” 2017), there were 85% more international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities than were reported a decade ago. Last year 1,078,822 international students were enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities, and this number is expected to grow exponentially in the coming years, not only in U.S. but also worldwide (Council, 2012).

In institutions of higher education, this increase in linguistic and cultural diversity is seen as important for students and communities. Diversity is valued so highly that it is often articulated as an institutional goal, with targets set for increasing diversity and measuring an institution’s progress toward recruiting and retaining diverse students and faculties. Driving this move toward greater diversity is the belief that the presence of a more diverse group of scholars enhances the educational experience of all students and better prepares them for participation in an increasingly multicultural, multilingual, and global society.

Despite this emphasis on the importance of diversity in the academy, however, out-dated

literacy policies and educational philosophies often work against linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education. This out-dated model of ELL literacies relies on the assumption that linguistic differences should be treated as deficiencies. In this deficiency model, monolingual and Standard English assumptions underpin institutional policies and pedagogical approaches to literacy learning, assumptions that work against valuing the linguistic diversity ELL students (and others) bring to the academy. In this way, linguistic diversity is seen by many as a problem to be fixed rather than a resource to be used in the service of learning.

In support of diversity, a growing body of scholarship (Canagarajah, 2006) calls for institutions to reject policies and practices that perpetuate the deficiency model. Despite these research-based arguments in favour of diversity, though, institutions continue to operate using the deficiency model, often because this research has not transformed practice.

This article describes how one university writing center changed policies and practices to support ELL students by engaging difference as a resource for education. Investigating Appalachian State University’s Writing Center as an institutional case study, this paper describes changes made to support ELL students and to leverage diversity as a teaching and learning resource. Programmatic and curricular changes were made in writing center staffing, staff education, and outreach using current research on

diversity and ELL. These changes were aimed at improving instruction for ELL students and raising awareness of linguistic diversity as a resource to be cultivated and supported. This paper concludes with specific actions writing center professionals can take to assist ELL students' writing and to support linguistic diversity on our campuses.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History

Writing centers have existed in higher education for over a century, but most writing centers were started in the past forty years in response to an influx of first generation U.S. college students, many of whom were considered underprepared for the demands of college-level writing (EdD, 2009). Individualized support through one-to-one tutoring was seen as the best method for helping these underprepared writers succeed.

While writing centers may have started to help developmental English writers (assumed to be monolingual), they have also been used heavily by ELL students, who recognize the valuable opportunities writing centers provide to practice the conventions of academic English and to have conversations in English about writing. Despite the presence of ELL students, writing centers in some areas of the US are still often assumed to be sites for monolingual, English (only) speaking students. This is not because writing center professionals intend to ignore the needs of ELL writers; rather, it is because of a lack preparation for TESOL and a monolingual bias in the academic culture. In the U.S., most writing center professionals are educated in English departments and rhetoric and composition programs. While these programs prepare to teachers and tutors of writing, they often assume a monolingual (English-only) speaking group of learners, and, based on this assumption, they fail to provide specific training in TESOL. With few exceptions, TESOL programs are located in foreign language departments, separated from English writing instruction administratively and in the curriculum. This bifurcation of TESOL and writing instruction means that most writing center professionals lack adequate training in working with ELL students.

2.2 Linguistic Diversity And Writing Centers: Two Models

As sites dedicated to writing support in English, writing centers are well-positioned to accommodate the needs of ELL students. Through one-to-one conferences with writing consultants, ELL students benefit in several important ways through writing center visits: 1) they have conversations about the conventions and genres of academic English in the context of their own writing projects; 2) they learn about the cultural and linguistic differences between their home countries and the U.S.; and 3) they practice English in a natural context through conversations with peer tutors (Rafoth, 2015).

In our work with ELL students, writing center professionals can employ practices that are based on assumptions from either the deficiency model or the resource model of difference. In a deficiency model, writing centers function as sites for eradicating language differences, where students come to erase linguistic differences that mark them as non-native English speakers. Alternatively, writing centers using a resource model operate as sites where linguistic differences are recognized as resources for learning and communicating. This model emphasizes collaboration between consultants and writers that supports students' voices, languages, and ideas at the same time that students are learning the discourses of academic English. The resource model is based on a negotiation between consultants and students, and this negotiation empowers ELL students to make choices for themselves about whether and how to present or erase linguistic or cultural differences in their writing.

Unfortunately, though, because of monolingual assumptions and a lack of education and training in a resource model, writing centers often operate from the deficiency model. Some of our writing center training manuals and scholarship sometimes even reinforce this view of ELLs' writing differences as problems to be fixed. Transforming writing center practices to a resource model requires a different set of principles that assume diversity is central, not marginal, to literacy learning. Putting these principles into practice was the focus of one writing center's program development and the subject of the study at the center of this paper.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

The study described in this paper focused on support for ELL students in a university writing center. To investigate the topic, the researcher relied on a case study method of research, in which one institution, Appalachian State University, served as the case subject and the site of inquiry. It was chosen for two reasons, the first was the researcher's in-depth local knowledge of the institution; the second reason was because Appalachian State represents a specific kind of case as an institution that struggles with issues deriving from its homogeneous population and resulting lack of linguistic and cultural diversity on campus. Support for diverse populations, in this context, is especially important and yet often difficult to achieve. Research on Appalachian State, therefore, yields insights for other homogeneous institutions struggling to serve and support the needs of diverse populations, as each institution is a "local manifestation of more general social relations" (Grabill, 2001).

The case study offered here should be considered a research strategy as well as a research method. While Appalachian State is the subject of the inquiry, the object of the inquiry is providing answers to questions concerning the role of writing centers in supporting linguistic and cultural diversity. The study was conducted over one academic year, 2016-2017, in which writing center professionals at Appalachian State attempted to change practices to reflect current research on diversity. The case study here is used as a form of institutional critique, "a rhetorical methodology for change" (Monske and Blair, 2016). This type of research engages the institution's policies, curriculum, and professional documents as data, interpreting and revising these materials to promote change. This rhetorical methodology offers a critique of current practices and exposes opportunities for change (Monske and Blair, 2016).

A recent trend in articles, conference papers, and book manuscripts in writing center studies calls for increasing support for diverse populations; some focus on multilingual writers (Lin and Deluca, 2017; Newman, 2017; Phillips, 2017; Schreiber and College, 2017) some on cultural and racial diversity (García, 2017; Monty, 2013) and others on marginalized populations (Babcock and Daniels, 2017). These writing center scholars call for greater attention to issues of diversity and inclusion, embracing a resource model of difference and emphasizing the need for institutional change. The results of this study add new knowledge to the

scholarly conversation about supporting diversity by offering recommendations for changes to writing center staffing, curriculum, and pedagogical resources.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Cultivating Diversity at Appalachian State University

By any measure, Appalachian State University is not a diverse institution: Of the 18,295 students enrolled at Appalachian State University in 2016-2017, only 16% self-reported as ethnically or racially diverse (non-white), and only 186, or about 1% of the student body, identified as international students. In recent years, the university has made progress in diversifying its students and faculty, but the institution continues to be overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and monolingual (Appalachian State University, 2017).

Although international students comprise only around 1% of the student body at Appalachian, they make up over 12% of the appointments in the University Writing Center. Last year, out of 4448 total writing center appointments, 563 identified as L2 English speakers.

Table 1: ELL appointments in the University Writing Center, 2016-2017.

Japanese	159
Spanish	119
Chinese	93
Other	62
Arabic	37
German	26
Korean	20
French	18
Farsi	12
Russian	8
Vietnamese	6
Portugese	3

In addition to making up 12% of all writing center appointments, international students also tend to use the writing center more frequently than their native

English speaking peers. Over half of the students who visit the writing center only make one appointment per year. By contrast, over 75% of ELL students made more than one appointment per year, and some visited the writing center weekly or biweekly, with a total of more than 20 visits during the course of a year. Using frequency of visits as a measure, ELL students are the best users of writing center services, taking advantage of our assistance during all stages of the writing process and for all types of writing assignments.

Although ELL students frequently use the writing center as clients, they rarely apply for employment in the writing center. As a result, the staff of the writing center, historically and currently, has not been ethnically or linguistically diverse. Where we have had some success with diversifying is with academic rank and discipline. The writing center is staffed by writing consultants at all academic ranks, and from different academic disciplines across the university. Of the 29 consultants currently employed by the writing center, 14 are undergraduate students, 9 are graduate students, 4 are composition faculty, and 2 are professional consultants. About half of the consultants have a background in English studies, and the others come from different disciplines, including business, communications, education, psychology, anthropology, history, music, and foreign languages. This disciplinary diversity is not matched by linguistic and ethnic diversity: Only 3 consultants are multilingual, able to speak and write fluently in a language other than English, and only 2 consultants are non-white. In other words, consultants may be diverse in their disciplinary identifications and levels of expertise, but consultants are not (yet) very diverse in terms of their ethnic, racial, or linguistic backgrounds.

4.2 Toward A (Diverse) Writing Culture

Changes to Appalachian's writing curriculum have begun to change the culture of writing on our campus, and these changes point toward some promising opportunities for cultivating a more diverse writing culture at the institution. In 2009, Appalachian revised its general education requirements to include a vertical writing component. Every student in the university, in every major, now takes a dedicated writing course in each year of their undergraduate study. The first two courses are taught by writing faculty in the rhetoric and composition program, and the junior and senior level courses are taught by faculty in the disciplines.

As students move through the writing curriculum, they are expected to transfer writing knowledge to new academic genres and contexts, culminating in a senior capstone course, which demonstrates students' readiness to participate successfully in their chosen academic and professional discourse communities.

Developed by Dr. Georgia Rhoades, Appalachian's Writing Across the Curriculum Director, the general education writing curriculum presents challenges to students and teachers. Two programs on campus support students and teachers as they confront these challenges: the University Writing Center, which assists students with their writing, and the Writing Across the Curriculum program, which supports faculty teaching the writing courses. Together, these programs support the vertical writing curriculum by giving teachers, consultants, and students the resources they need to succeed in teaching and learning in the writing courses. These resources aim to demystify academic discourses for all students, including those whose home language is not standard English.

Before the changes in the writing curriculum, students took two writing courses, both in the English department. At that time, the University Writing Center was also located in the English department and primarily served students in English composition courses. The revised general education curriculum moved writing into all disciplines in the university, and, around the same time, the University Writing Center moved out of the English department building and into a new library in the center of campus. Moving writing out of English and into the university enabled students to see writing as a multidisciplinary tool, not a resource only for English. This move toward recognizing and supporting disciplinary differences in writing began a culture change on our campus. This culture shift, which has centered on engaging disciplinary diversity in writing, promises also to point the way toward greater recognition and support for linguistic and cultural diversity as well.

Moving writing administratively and physically out of the English department and into the university library sent the message that writing is not owned by any other single discipline. Moreover, and of central importance for ELL students, as the leaving the English department sent the message that writing in the university isn't owned by English. This separation of English from writing opens new possibilities of valuing and supporting linguistic and cultural differences, much along with the disciplinary differences in writing we now accept as

part of general education. As a result of the writing center's move, writing center staff diversified in terms of disciplinarity and in terms of academic rank and levels of experience. The writing center staff grew to include non-English majors as well as professional consultants with more experience than the undergraduate peer consultants that had formed the majority of our staff before the writing center moved from the English department.

4.3 Writing Center Staff Education

Cultivating a tutoring approach that engages difference as a resource requires a revision to consultant education and professional development. As mentioned in the section on history, writing center professionals often—and at all ranks, from undergraduates to directors—lack a background in TESOL. This lack of TESOL training, combined with the monolingual assumptions guiding literacy learning in the U.S., leaves writing center practitioners unprepared for using linguistic difference as a resource. This means that even those who are teaching and mentoring new writing consultants often fail to adequately prepare them to work with ELL students. Even writing center training manuals often treat differences as additives, as though stereotyping writers into separate categories—ELL writers, writers with disabilities, developmental writers, etc—means that there is a standard, monolingual writer who is typical, and everyone else who is “different” must be treated to address or remove the difference.

In a model of staff education that focuses on treating difference as a resource, Blazer (2015) calls for cultivating a “transformative ethos” in consultant education. Her curricular model approaches diversity and inclusivity as both ideals and resources in teaching and learning. She offers examples of regular reading, writing about, and discussion of texts that engage with differences as resources. She also asks consultants to develop materials and resources for their work with students. Through careful attention to connecting theories and practices that support diversity, her model of staff education challenges consultants to engage with linguistic and cultural differences instead of avoiding or eliminating them.

Adapting Blazer's call for re-imagining writing center staff education, we are placing diversity and inclusion at the center of consultant training and professional development at Appalachian. One example of an excellent text that engages new consultants and challenges them to re-think their

assumptions about academic English is *Writing Across Borders* (“Writing Across Borders | Writing Center | Oregon State University,” 2005), a short video made by faculty at Oregon State University that features international students talking about their experiences with academic English in the U.S. compared to writing in their native languages. After watching the video, we discuss the issues raised in the video, and students write about how they might transform their tutoring practices based on some of the ideas presented in the video. In reflective essays at the end of their first semester as consultants, they often report that the video opened their eyes to cultural differences in writing that they were unaware of before.

In addition to reading (or watching) challenging texts, which are then discussed and written about, our staff education curriculum, like Blazer's model, asks consultants to develop materials and resources to support their work of tutoring. In the past few years, our staff has developed some excellent resources that support all writers, especially those for whom academic English is a new discourse.

Led by writing consultant Dennis Bohr (“WAC Glossary of Terms | Writing Across the Curriculum | Appalachian State University,” 2015), our writing center staff has produced a series of short handouts—WAGS (Writing About Guidelines)—that describe conventions and genres of writing in various disciplines in the university. These handouts are available in print format in the writing center for consultants to use in their tutoring sessions. The WAGS are also located on the writing center's website, which can be accessed by students, consultants, and teachers to use in their teaching and learning about disciplinary conventions. These materials focus on demystifying academic writing, and are helpful to all students, especially those unfamiliar with conventions of academic writing in the U.S.

Another WAC initiative that supports all students, which is helpful to ELL students in particular, is the development of the *WAC Glossary of Terms* (“WAC Glossary of Terms | Writing Across the Curriculum | Appalachian State University,” 2015). This glossary, which is located on the Writing Across the Curriculum website, offers pages of writing-related terms, defined and explained for students. This glossary of key terms includes words used in discussing writing (revision, invention, rhetoric). Establishing a common vocabulary for talking about writing is one way Appalachian has developed a culture of writing on our campus. Learning English terms for discussing

writing holds particular value for ELL students, whose English and writing knowledge is expanded through learning vocabulary for thinking through and discussing issues related to their academic writing process.

In addition to supporting and mentoring consultants in their work with ELL students, these resources also give students language to express themselves in conversations with consultants about their challenges with writing. Developing materials not only helps student writers, but it also assists consultants in thinking through ways to discuss differences and challenges writers bring to writing center sessions.

4.4 Diversity Recruitment And Outreach

Tutoring methods and materials that support diversity and inclusion form the basis of how writing centers can use difference as a resource for learning. This focus on tutoring is the most important transformation we can make to support ELL writers. Beyond the tutoring, however, we still need to find ways to expand the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the writing center staff. Given the lack of diversity in the overall population at Appalachian, it is not surprising that the writing center staff reflects that lack of diversity. However, this homogeneity makes it more, not less, important for us to lead efforts in supporting diversity when and where we can. Supporting diversity and inclusion in a writing center means viewing diversity as central, not marginal, to literacy learning. Although we have more work to do, we have made some changes to direct efforts toward diversifying our staff and supporting diversity in our work with students. These efforts include: 1) updating the writing center's mission statement and strategic plan to emphasize the central importance of diversity; 2) increasing outreach to students through a consistent writing center presence at orientations and diversity-related events on campus; 3) diversifying staff through targeted recruiting of international students and students of color; and 4) transforming consultant education and professional development to focus on pedagogical approaches that support teaching and learning using diversity as a resource. These efforts are meant to signal a genuine commitment to ELL students and anyone else who might see themselves as outsiders in the institution, marked by linguistic or cultural differences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Linguistic and cultural differences present challenges for international students as they learn conventions of academic English. As sites of individualized writing instruction, and peer collaboration, writing centers are ideal sites for supporting ELL students in learning academic discourses.

The linguistic and cultural diversity international students bring to US universities enriches the educational experience for all students. Creating a culture of writing and a common language about writing enables conversation and transfer of knowledge across discursive boundaries, which helps all writers, especially those who are new to the cultures, genres, and conventions of U.S. academic English. Over time, these changes in staffing, education, and outreach have the potential to change academic culture by challenging deficiency-based assumptions about linguistic differences and replacing those assumptions with policies and philosophies that support diversity and inclusion.

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