The J.F. Oberlin Writing Support Center Experience：
A Progress Report

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Abstract

University writing centers are a relatively new phenomenon in Japan；yet such facilities are taking an ever-increasing role in second language writing（Johnston, Cornwell & Yoshida, 2008）. The benefits of writing centers are well known for native learners of English as well as non-native learners of English（Bruce & Rafoth, 2004）. This is a report of the daily practices of tutors, receptionists and advising faculty members at the J.F. Oberlin University Writing Support Center（WSC）. This report aims to remove some preconceived notions of those who are unfamiliar with writing centers and tutoring, while simultaneously clarifying some of the academic reasoning behind policies implemented in the WSC. Finally, some future research opportunities are discussed.

要旨

日本における大学のライティングセンターは比較的最近になって始まったものだが、このような施設の第二言語のライティングにおいての役割はさらに増加している（Johnston, Cornwell & Yoshida, 2008）。英語を母国語とする学習者だけでなく、そうでない学習者にとってもライティングセンターの利点はよく知られている（Bruce & Rafoth, 2004）。これは桜美林大学ライティングセンターのチューター（個別指導教員）、受付、運営責任者である教員の日々の実務の報告書である。ライティングセンターやそこでの指導に精通していない関係者の先入観を取り除く事と同時に、ライティングセンターで実際に行われている実務の背後にある教育理論を明らかにすることを目的としている。最後に今後の研究の可能性について論じる。

1. Background on J.F. Oberlin Writing Support Center

J.F. Oberlin University Writing Support Center is a supplementary service offered to undergraduates at the Machida campus in Tokyo, Japan. J.F. Oberlin University, a private university, is located on the edge of Tokyo. Most undergraduate students are members of one of four main departments：Liberal Arts, Performing Arts, Sports and Health, and Business Management that is linked to an Aviation Program. The school is currently expanding into a fifth department that will be called the College of Global Communication. J.F. Oberlin University also has a strong international presence, sending Japanese students abroad every year and hosting international students, both short and long-term.

The Writing Support Center was a joint project between faculty in the English Language Program and the Japanese Language Program, which are both part of the Cornerstone of General Education Department. Faculty members from both departments were familiar with writing centers, having worked in them previously or having used them during their own studies. The two programs（English and Japanese）drafted a bilingual proposal in the fall of 2012, which was approved to begin operation in the spring of 2013.

The English and Japanese Language Programs envisioned a large center helping all students in any area of language learning, providing "meaningful help to all campus writers with all kinds of writing questions"（Powers 1993）. However, due to a variety of reasons the program was scaled back to a more manageable foreign-language writing center. The center would offer English assistance for non-native English speakers and Japanese assistance for non-native Japanese speakers. Williams describes the foreign-language writing center as an "ideal place to address the problems and challenges of second language writing"（2002）. This decision was made to keep the scope of the center small and attractive to university administration with specific attention to funding and operational cost. However, the designers left open the possibility of expansion into other languages/services, to be revisited later dependent upon the center's success.

In 2013, J.F. Oberlin University Writing Support Center opened to any currently enrolled undergraduate student who wanted additional foreign language support. The target population for English services was the 2000 first-year students enrolled in non-major English for General Purposes and for Japanese services it was a combination of short-term study abroad students and long-term international students.

Four full-time faculty members currently manage the J.F. Oberlin University Writing

Support Center. The Japanese tutors are graduate students or recent graduates of the department of Japanese Education and most of the English tutors are recent Oberlin College graduates working at J.F. Oberlin University through a fellowship. One visiting lecturer from a sister school is also a tutor. In addition to tutors, there are three undergraduate students who work part-time as receptionists/office managers. In its first year the Writing Support Center provided approximately 300 30-minute sessions and in its second year it provided slightly over 350 sessions.

2. Leading Up to a Session

Three days a week a student receptionist receives a key from the staff of the Gakujikan building.（Gakujikan is the name of the building where the WSC is located.）The receptionist unlocks the doors and prepares the center for a day of tutoring. Prior to the arrival of the first tutor the receptionist does simple tasks such as turning on lights, starting up computers and preparing all tutorial rooms. The receptionist then places signs throughout the Gakujikan building alerting students and faculty that the WSC is open and available for tutoring sessions.

The receptionist returns to the waiting area and accesses the online reservation system. J. F. Oberlin WSC uses a third-party online reservation system called SuperSASS. SuperSASS is a subscription based website paid for via the WSC annual budget. The reservation website can be viewed at the following address.

English：http://www.supersaas.com/schedule/J_F_Oberlin_WSC/WSC_AY2015_English *
Japanese：http://www.supersaas.com/schedule/J_F_Oberlin_WSC/WSC_AY2015_
          Japanese*
Portal：http://obiriner.obirin.ac.jp/campus_life_guide/study_support/1csch0000000kisd.
       html

*These websites change on an annual basis, but the portal website retains the same
  information every year.

The websites can be viewed by anyone, but only students with a registered J. F. Oberlin

email address can make reservations. This online reservation system, similar to hotels or airlines, allows students to make reservations at any time during the day and the system relieves some of the burden of scheduling from the receptionist. Also, it allows the WSC to keep a database with student profiles（Lorenz, Homuth, Schmitt, and Karwath 2015）. The receptionist then checks to see which slots have been reserved. The receptionist then turns to a physical filing system and checks to see if the student who reserved a session has visited the center before or if the student is a first time user.

A detailed file is kept for each student who visits the WSC. Inside, each file contains a basic profile of the student with contact information and a copy of any work the student has brought to the WSC. Attached to each piece of work is an overview of the session with tutor comments. These files are labeled alphabetically and locked in the reception area. The files are periodically moved to storage as students graduate. After a period of 10 years the files will be destroyed.

If the receptionist sees the file of a student who has used the center before, the file is set aside for the tutor to view prior to the start of the session. The receptionist also leaves a paper for the tutor to make comments and a brief follow-up survey for the student to complete at the end of each session. If the receptionist does not see the file for an incoming student, a new file must be created. The receptionist prepares a blank data profile sheet as well as a blank tutor comment paper and a brief follow-up survey.

At this point the tutor is likely to arrive. The receptionist greets the tutor and explains the daily schedule. The tutor and the receptionist discuss any changes to the schedule, including last minute cancelations or the possibility of a student extending a session. The tutor then takes the student files from the receptionist and begins to review any of the student's previous sessions. The sessions at J.F. Oberlin WSC are only 30 minutes long. Any preparation that can be done prior to the start of the session can save valuable time and make each session more focused and meaningful for the student. Thirty minutes was chosen as the most beneficial time for both students and tutors. Other Japanese university writing centers have sessions that range from 15 to 60 minutes（Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell, 2010）, but thirty minutes strikes a balance between helping multiple students and dedicating enough time to each student.

The tutor will check the student file to see if the incoming student often brings a longer piece of work that is to be revised or brings writings that can be finished in a single session. The tutor can also see the writer's style, obtain a general understanding of the writer's ability

level and decide how to better adjust their tutoring style accordingly. Additionally, a tutor will look at the comments from fellow tutors to see any hints, suggestions, or problem areas encountered when previously working with a particular student. If a tutor notices that a student has never visited the center, he or she will be sure to conference with the student to make sure the student is aware of how the WSC operates.

Now that the center is open and the tutors are busy preparing for upcoming sessions, students with reservations will begin to arrive. The receptionist greets each student. In the case of a student who has used the center before, the receptionist will ask if the student has a paper or notes he/she would like to use during the session. The receptionist will then make a copy so that both the tutor and student can simultaneously make corrections and suggestions during a session. Note taking is important because it will help the writer to "improve the concentration or their implication of attention to resources" (Van Meter et al. 1994). While the receptionist is making a copy, the student is asked to fill in some basic information about the writing they have brought. The information can include the due date, title, name of the course or professor, and any specific concerns the student has that he/she wishes the tutor to address. The student waits for the receptionist to gather all the papers to be used during this session and then presents them to the tutor. In the case of a student who has never used the center, the receptionist will complete the same tasks for a repeating student, but explain the purpose of the forms and ask the student to complete a data profile (which is only required during the first visit). Once the student has completed all necessary paperwork and the tutor has adequately prepared, the receptionist will direct the student to the tutor and the session will begin.

3. The Main Session

Now that the tutor has had a brief, though suitable, amount of time to prepare, he/she will greet the student and accompany him/her to the tutorial room. The tutorial room is a small private study space furnished with a multimedia tower, a large circular desk and several chairs. The room also has a door that can shut but remains open during the tutorial session for security purposes. Once the tutor and student have been seated the tutor will ask the student his/her desired focus for that session. Many students mistakenly think the tutors have universal access to every assignment from every professor, which is impossible. To better help the tutor understand the student's assignment, the tutor will first ask the student to

explain the assignment plus any other instruction from the professor. The tutor and the student will spend five minutes setting goals for the remainder of the setting. It is important that the writer "understand why tutoring is being offered to them and what they can expect to accomplish at each tutoring session" (Holland-Johnson 2010). The goals can be altered but the creation of goals helps to add purpose and direction to the session (Gillespie and Lerner 2000).

With goals established, the tutor will usually ask the student to read aloud a section of the paper. This seemingly simple act of reading aloud often focuses the student and allows him/ her to spot errors or inconstancies in the paper. Elbow states that students can harness this process of careful reading out loud for the late stage of revising (2012). After reading aloud, the tutor may begin to ask high-order, open-ended questions like, "Why did you choose this word/phrase?" or "What do you think is the importance of this passage?" The tutor is trying to assist the writer to think critically about his/her own paper. Many students will default to the tutor and ask what he/she thinks about the paper. At this point, the tutor may have to spend a few moments explaining the purpose of the WSC. It is not an opportunity for the tutor to simply edit the paper for the student. The tutoring experience is meant to be an active learning experience where the tutor uses questioning to make the writer think about their own choices. A single session is only 30 minutes long. It is impossible for a tutor to address everyone of the writer's concerns. Therefore, the writer and the tutor must make a plan for the writer to follow once he/she leaves the session. This could be the expansion of a paragraph or the inclusion of a new idea. The new draft could be brought back to the WSC at a later point in time. Unfortunately, most students have little time before the deadline and often do not have the opportunity to meet with the tutor again. It is extremely important for the student to have a clear understanding of what he/she must accomplish before completing the assignment.

Once the tutor and student have completed the session, the tutor will thank the student for using the WSC and accompany the student back to the reception area. The tutor will complete any notes on the day's session. The tutor will also scan a copy of the student's work and save it in PDF format. This data could be used in a future comparative study about the amount and quality of student development though usage of the WSC (see following section on Research Opportunities). While the tutor is completing the student file, the receptionist also thanks the student for his/her participation and asks the student to complete a brief survey that can be used to improve the quality of future sessions. The student will usually leave at this point. The tutor will hand off the completed files to the receptionist and the process will repeat for each incoming student. Depending on the day, this process may be

repeated eight to ten times.

Once the tutor is finished, he/she will help clean up the tutorial area and have one final check-in with the receptionist. The receptionist will repeat all the procedures done at the opening. Before leaving, a written summary of any events or issues that occurred during the day will be completed in a log or email and shared among the other receptionists and the advising faculty.

4. The Role of Faculty Advisors

As described earlier, four faculty members are responsible for overseeing the operation of the center. Two members are from the English Language Program（ELP）and two members are from the Japanese Language Program（JLP）. Of the four members, two are responsible for direct supervision of tutors and receptionists. Some of those responsibilities include creating schedules, training and hiring tutors and receptionists, checking in with tutors and receptionists as often as possible, ordering supplies, and solving any problems that may occur within the writing center. The remaining two faculty members are mainly involved in hiring and budget allocation. It is important that the responsibility for the WSC is spread out among different members from different programs. The collaboration among these four members helps to insure a positive experience for both students who use the center and the tutors and receptionists who work there.

5. Future Research Endeavors

The WSC has been in operation for only two years and six months at the time of this article. Considering the fact that most university writing centers in North America can be traced back to the 1940s, it can be said that the J.F Oberlin WSC is in the earliest stages of development. This early stage of growth does offer the opportunity for some interesting research prospects.

5.1 Tutor Questioning

A doctoral candidate at the University of California proposed a joint research project and contacted one of the faculty advisors of the WSC. The project would look at the types of

questions tutors ask and the impact these questions have on student motivation. This project would also look to reinforce the importance of the use of effective questioning of tutors to help L2 student writers become more confident and skilled in their use of English language, specifically writing. Additionally, some possible improvement to tutor questioning skills will be explored.

5. 2 Grade Benefits

The overall benefit of writing support centers is well known for native learners of English as well as non-native learners of English（Bruce & Rafoth, 2004）. These benefits are most often discussed in qualitative measurements. Most people in contact with writing support centers（educators, researchers, administrators, students）support WSCs even if nothing beyond intuition is justified. A study that looks to compare student development though writing center usage could be extremely beneficial at J. F. Oberlin WSC because all first year students engage in a standardized writing curriculum. Running a study like this in a standardized curriculum could show individual student development.

5.3 Session Length

The most often request from students is to increase the length of the sessions. The current session length is set at 30 minutes. This was done for both academic and logistic reasons. A 30-minute session is within the range of currently utilized sessions（Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell, 2010）. If the session is too short, the tutor does not have enough time to analyze the paper with the student. If the session is too long, the writer or the tutor may become unfocused or the student may become more dependent on the tutor.

This research project may be most feasible because of the ease of which data can be collected. There have been no preliminary findings yet, but some of the students may wish to extend sessions because of the pressure of approaching deadlines. Perhaps as students utilize the center they will begin to understand the importance of writing as a process and allocate enough time to each of the stages.

Conclusion

The J. F. Oberlin University Writing Support Center has been in operation for less than

three short years. The center continues to grow at a slow yet steady pace. Tutors work hard to ensure all students can receive detailed, personalized advice in a succinct manner. Receptionists use clear and refined daily operational processes to keep the center running smoothly. Advising faculty keep the center running through training, feedback and budget issues. Each of these three parties works in tandem to provide a quality writing center experience.

Several possible areas for research have been listed and will likely start in the near future. It is important for the writing center to not only increase in size, but at the same time it is important to maintain a high level of quality. The level of quality can be tested and adjusted through various research opportunities.

Finally, by articulating the overall writing center experience and explaining the rationale behind some of the decisions, more people can have a deeper understanding of the writing center.

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