

“We Keep Moving Forward:” Reimagining Writing Center Approaches to Non-Traditional Assignments

ABSTRACT:

This presentation offers a work-in-progress report on a pilot program for a hybrid position that combines a writing assistant/fellow role with an “exhibition assistant” role. Writing centers increasingly deal with visual literacy, new media, and career-preparatory curricula that require adaptability, technological skills, and the ability to think outside of the box. How can we provide students who work in and rely on writing centers with the best possible tools for handling non-traditional writing assignments?

PROPOSAL:

As a writing assistant, I am constantly presented with information about how best to help students working on long essays, short papers, applications, and senior theses. The reality of college-level writing is that professors assign these projects regularly, and for the most part writing assistants work with students who have been assigned traditional papers. Research and experience have shown that these types of assignments are incredibly important. But what happens when professors use non-traditional approaches to assess their students’ learning?

The exhibition assistant/writing assistant hybrid position came into being as a result of collaboration between a writing assistant with extensive museum experience, a Writing Center director, and a history professor teaching a class entitled Early Medieval Worlds. Each student will take on the role of a museum curator while organizing an exhibition of selections from Carleton College’s extensive manuscript facsimile collection, producing educational and textual materials to accompany the objects, and gaining hands-on curatorial experience. This process can ultimately be career-preparatory: museum curators are required to know how to produce effective object labels and text panels. Does writing a five-page paper really prepare students for this work?

What can we learn from such a novel course? With an increase in the academic writing genres being assigned in classes, we’ve adopted a broader sense of writing that requires critical thinking, research, and observation. How will the writing assistant role need to adapt? Nimbleness, flexibility, and meeting the needs of curricula and new technologies are essential elements of Writing Center culture and will be imperative in the implementation of this pilot program.

This hybrid role raises several questions:

- What constitutes “writing” in a writing-rich course?
- Does this role call into question directive versus nondirective approaches?
- How much contact is required with the professor? How much contact is required with the students?
- How does this hybrid role differ from the traditional Writing Assistant role?

- What does the selection and training process look like? Who is responsible for identifying peer tutors with the relevant skills and background? Is museum experience, in fact, necessary?
- Are writing center best practices effective, or does the role require rethinking that pedagogy? What is gained? What, if anything, is lost?

This presentation will ultimately focus on long-term questions of sustainability: having held this hybrid position, what have I learned? What can/should I take back to the training/professional development of other writing assistants? How much preparation did I do, and was it adequate?

Combining the writing assistant role with an exhibition assistant role requires a renewed focus on visual literacy, an understanding of the museum world, and the ability to adapt and change. This presentation will dive deeply into the potential future of this hybrid position and explore the imagination and determination required to rethink the role of writing assistants when dealing with non-traditional assignments. The presentation will also focus on the challenges and joys of envisioning a new future for writing centers. As Walt Disney once said, “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible.”