

“They’re All Writers”

TEACHING PEER TUTORING IN THE
ELEMENTARY WRITING CENTER

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Writing Centers in the Elementary School

When most elementary school educators hear the term *writing center*, they visualize a classroom space stocked with lined, unlined, and colored papers; a variety of markers, pens, and pencils; and other materials children would use in independent writing. However, when the educators involved in this project began designing our first writing center, the type of space we had in mind resembled a university writing center where students bring their writing for peer tutoring focused on that piece of writing. The idea of a student-led writing center for peer tutoring was born from long-term collaboration and colearning, facilitated by our National Writing Project site at Oklahoma State University. Annie Ortiz, a 4th-grade teacher and OSU Writing Project codirector, was one of our partners in this work. Below, we open with her story about noticing the needs of her students for greater responsibility and agency in their work and the realization that a writing center could meet the teachers' and students' needs.

In this book, we share what we have developed and learned from these collaborations—from the germination of an idea to the development of a writing center and peer tutoring curriculum; from our exploration into possible models and structures for a writing center to our research and reflection on student learning. At the risk of sounding like an infomercial, we have included in this book all the essential components a teacher would need to establish a writing center and teach students how to be effective writing peer tutors. Over the course of several years, these lessons have been taught with students across the range of elementary grade levels, and the resulting student (and teacher) learning has been invigorating.

Although student-led writing centers have been present in American universities since the 1930s (Carino, 1995; Murphy & Law, 1995) and are quite popular as a means of improving writing

at the high school level, their presence in elementary schools is extremely rare. In fact, some elementary writing educators argue that peer conferencing, the essence of writing center interactions, is difficult to implement productively in elementary classrooms because of the metacognitive skills required. They also predict that peer conferences may be limited to editing tasks and conversations about the writing process rather than the rich development of the writing content (Fletcher, Portalupi, & Williams, 2006; Routman, 2000). However, through this work, we have learned that peer conferencing and peer tutoring are viable at the elementary level and can lead to collaborative learning whereby both parties grow as writers from the interaction. Bruffee (1984) states, and we agree, that "the way [writers] talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write" (quoted in Villanueva, 2003, p. 422). Conversations between writers can be powerful sites of learning about writing.

**A PERCOLATING IDEA:
HOW SKYLINE ELEMENTARY GOT ITS WRITING CENTER**

When I was little, my parents began their day with steaming cups of coffee. They had an old silver coffee pot with a metal filter that would sit down inside the pot. You would fill the pot with water, drop in the filter, and spoon in deep-brown coffee. A small lid with a little clear top covered it all. As the coffee percolated it would bubble and bubble. You could see, hear, and smell when the coffee was ready for the cup.

My thinking is like that coffee pot. I percolate on ideas. Stuff them in, let them sit, and then they bubble to the point of being ready for the next step. That's how the writing center at Skyline began. In February, after the 5th-graders at my school had completed the state writing test, their teachers looked bedraggled. They said they didn't really know how to teach writing. I understood that frustration and tucked the thought away.

Later, as the year wound down and the hormones of 5th-graders were popping up, frustration lingered in the air. The art teacher asked 5th-graders what they needed. They replied, "More responsibility." I thought, "Of course they do; they need to give back." It was their last year of elementary school. I tucked that

tidbit away along with the teacher's frustration at teaching writing. I started percolating.

I knew the OSU (Oklahoma State University) Writing Project's Summer Institute was around the corner and writing ideas would be bountiful. I wondered what I could glean from this summer. As the institute opened, a fellow participant introduced herself as a tutor for a writing center at another university. Her fervor about the writing center was ever present. I heard her, all 5 weeks of the institute, give voice to this passion. Frustration and passion didn't seem a recipe for good coffee, but the ideas were still percolating.

During the last week of the Summer Institute, the director of OSU's writing center, Rebecca Damron, was a guest speaker. She described what the writing center was, how it helped incoming freshmen, who worked there, how they liked to team with high schools, and a variety of ways professors got their students to the writing center. All of a sudden my percolating ideas bubbled over. The coffee was ready. I was about to burst out of my seat.

During lunch break, I went down to the writing center. There was Rebecca talking to Britton, the then-director of our Writing Project. I wondered aloud, "*So do you think you could start a writing center in an elementary school?*" I knew it would give 5th-grade teachers knowledge about writing and give 5th-grade students responsibility, and there would be a definite love of writing spilling over from dedicated tutors. If you wanted to get students to a writing center, the place to start was in an elementary school. I unveiled those sentiments to Rebecca. "Well, why not?" was her response.

And that's how Skyline Elementary got its writing center. A few percolating ideas brewed together to make one steaming success. This is our recipe. We like the rich flavor and want to share. Try it. See how its tastes for you. Add some cream, honey, sugar, or vanilla. Tweak the recipe and find your own way to strengthen the brew.

Annie Ortiz, 4th-grade teacher,
Oklahoma State University Writing Project codirector

PEER TUTORING LESSONS

Before we could open the writing center and send students off to tutor one another in writing, we needed to teach them how to talk about writing and how to coach another writer in improving his or her piece. We designed a series of eight lessons to teach children essential components of writing—such as clear ideas and content, organization,

and effective word choice—and to teach them ways to talk about writing and the writing process with peers. English graduate students who were tutors in the university’s writing center helped us create and teach these writing lessons to the 5th-grade students at Skyline Elementary. The lessons were taught once a week over the course of 8 weeks and lasted about an hour each. There were four 5th-grade classrooms, taught by Heather Corbett, Julie Farrington, Carey Henderson, and Cate Pogue. Some of the 5th-grade teachers chose to lead a review after the lessons in order to emphasize the main ideas. The teachers usually conducted a second lesson during the week, in between visits from the OSU writing center tutors. This second lesson would either be a follow-up to the weekly tutor training lesson or a time for students to draft a piece of writing in preparation for the upcoming lesson. The lessons evolved over a period of 4 years into the following process:

- Week 1: Metaphors for the Writing Process
- Week 2: Learning to Peer Tutor with the WRITE mnemonic
- Week 3: Peer Tutoring Skit
- Week 4: Ideas and Content—“Show, Don’t Tell”
- Week 5: Organization
- Week 6: Word Choice and Sentence Fluency
- Week 7: Conventions
- Week 8: Practice Peer Tutoring

These tutor training lessons are detailed in Chapter 6. The final versions of the lessons were heavily revised by both us and the 4th- and 5th-grade teachers based on trial and error with the initial lessons and on what we felt was important. Therefore, these lessons have been vetted in real classrooms multiple times. We hope that you will try them out in your own classrooms and modify and adapt the lessons to fit your needs and the students you teach. We’d love to hear the lessons you develop and the modifications you make!

THE SKYLINE WRITING CENTER

The Skyline Writing Center opened in January 2011 and was in operation until the beginning of May. The teachers decided that the best location for the writing center (WC) would be in the school library/media center. The WC was open for peer tutoring once a week, at

the same time each week, for about 45 minutes and staffed by two or three university writing tutors. We started small, with just the 4th- and 5th-grade classes. We knew these teachers were excited about the writing center and invested in making it work. The 5th-graders tutored the 4th-graders. Fifth graders were called “coaches” or tutors, and 4th-graders were called the “creators” or writers. Fifth-graders volunteered to tutor each week and were paired up with a 4th-grader who had signed up requesting to come to the Writing Center. The adult facilitators were in charge of assigning a “creator” to a particular “coach” and providing assistance to the 5th-graders when the conversations stalled. Although this model was not without its challenges, we were able to establish a writing center that created space for some amazing conversations and writing to happen. We have woven classroom teachers’ stories and insights into the process of implementing a peer tutoring writing center in an elementary school in certain chapters so that readers can hear the teachers’ firsthand experiences.

It is important for us to describe the student populations with whom we were working. Skyline Elementary serves a largely low-income community of families. At the time of this writing, approximately 57% of the students received free or reduced price meals. Seventy-five percent of the student population was Caucasian, with the other 25% being a balanced mix of African American, Hispanic, and Native American ethnicities. The population was from mostly working-class White backgrounds, and this was a high-needs demographic. Similarly, the second school we worked with, Will Rogers Elementary, served a low-income community: Eighty-one percent of the students received free or reduced-price meals; 63% of the population was Caucasian and 17% was Hispanic. The remaining 20% were Native American (7%), African American (7%), Asian (4%), and students of other ethnicities (2%). The students leading these peer tutoring sessions were diverse and typically from meager means. Some were students who were often seen in the nurse’s office, the principal’s office, or sitting in the hallway, because they were “in trouble.” Yet, as Annie Ortiz so wisely inferred, they needed and craved responsibility and respect and were willing to work hard to achieve these needs.

POWERFUL PRACTICE IS CONTAGIOUS: THE WILL ROGERS WRITING CENTER

National Writing Project community members teach each other and ignite sparks of excitement in one another for teaching writing. We, Jenn and Rebecca, presented our work with Skyline’s Writing Center at Oklahoma State University’s Writing Project Summer Institute, and Jackie Iob, a reading specialist at Will Rogers Elementary, was one of the summer scholars attending the institute. She said, “I’m really interested in starting a writing center at my school! Can you come and talk to the teachers about this work?” Of course, we enthusiastically said yes. We met with several teachers at Will Rogers, and after a few conversations about the possibilities, a 4th-grade teacher and the three 5th-grade teachers decided to start a writing center.

The writing center at Will Rogers was structured and managed differently from the one at Skyline. The teachers decided to house the writing centers in their classrooms—one in a 4th-grade room and one in a 5th-grade room. They opened the center up to writers from Grades 1 through 4 to attend. The following year, two brand-new, first-year 4th- and 5th-grade teachers directed the writing center and taught the peer tutoring lessons for a second iteration of the writing center at Will Rogers. In Chapter 4, we discuss different structures of the writing centers as well as the logistics of establishing, maintaining, and sustaining an elementary school writing center. We share ideas for gaining support from administrators for the writing center and offer suggestions for negotiating the work needed to sustain the writing center.

When working with the teachers and students, we quickly realized that they needed easy access to all the materials—the lesson plans and tutoring charts used in training the writing tutors. Their need for access to these materials was the impetus for this book. Detailed lesson plans make up Chapter 6, and tutoring charts are located at the end of that chapter. Appendix A contains supporting materials for the tutor training lessons as well as lesson options for the lower elementary grades for the first, introductory lesson. Unlike the Skyline Project in which OSU college students worked with teachers to implement the tutor training lessons, teachers at Will Rogers Elementary took the lead and implemented most of the lessons on their own, with Jenn occasionally coteaching a lesson here or there. This book contains the materials and information you need to teach your students how to peer tutor and to get a writing center up and running at your school.