When Hard Questions are Asked: Evaluating Writing Centers

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Over the last fifteen years, I have become increasingly convinced that writing centers should evaluate themselves and pay more attention to doing so. When I talk about this with colleagues at conferences, some flatly disagree, some say evaluation is a good idea but they never get around to it, others explain they are so busy they simply do some kind of "quick and dirty" evaluation, and a few talk fervently about their efforts to conduct valid and meaningful evaluations. I would like to put forward for consideration the following argument. Writing centers should conduct more <u>sophisticated</u> evaluations. Writing centers should turn to educational program evaluation and select general <u>types</u> of evaluations most appropriate for writing centers. Congruent with the appropriate types, writing centers should design and share <u>small-scale</u> evaluations. The last part of the paper presents an evaluation which exemplifies and thus clarifies what is called for in the first half of the paper.

Accountability Pressures and Current Evaluation

Writing centers should evaluate themselves regularly. Program evaluation is a principal part of a writing center director's job. When the National Writing Centers Association lists the five essentials in the preparation of directors, it includes "knowledge of evaluation methods" (Simpson 37). A director should "provide for regular and thorough evaluation of the writing center's program" (Simpson 38) because doing so can improve the service to students and influence the amount of funding from those who control the budget. As North argues, as the writing center field matures, it has to test its key assumptions, for example, that one-to-one writing conferences change students' writing processes. "Our primary purpose, naturally, is to make writing centers work better for the writers they serve" (North 33), but a second aim, says North, is to challenge those who do not believe writing centers work. A decade after North wrote

this, the second aim is particularly important because a considerable number of writing centers are "one step away from oblivion" (Sherwood 8). Sherwood discusses severe cuts at Southwestern Louisiana; California State, Chico; Portland State; Eastern Oregon State; Illinois State University; and the University of Tennessee at Martin. He recommends that the first thing writing centers do to increase their chances of surviving the hard times is evaluate seriously. For this, says Fielding-Pickering, "cold, hard proof is required" (2). "Let's face it," writes Pemberton,

> writing centers are a luxury. High school, college, and university writing programs have existed, even flourished, without them, and they can easily do so again. When administrators are firmly told . . . to do more with less . . ., writing centers could easily find themselves at the bottom of the money food chain. (8)

This is certainly a worry for many Canadian writing center directors, for they have seen budgets slashed and neighboring centers extirpated. A recent survey of 33 writing centers across the country revealed that "approximately half of the respondents indicate that their funding is on a year-by-year basis and has to be 'fought for' every year. Although 8 centres have base funding, half of these feel insecure about future funding" (Bell and Hubert 12).

Evaluation is "the systematic collection and interpretation of evidence, leading, as part of the process, to a judgment of value with a view to action" (Beeby qtd. in Wolf 3). This definition is appealing because it highlights four important aspects of evaluation. Systematic: Evaluations should employ rigorous procedures. As writing centers mature, they demand more reliable and valid information; as senior administrators face tougher budget decisions in the face of more skilled lobbying, they look for more trustworthy data. Interpretation: Someone must interpret the raw data, and writing centers should take the initiative in evaluation so that the most

knowledgeable and understanding people do the interpretation. <u>Judgment</u>: Evaluation always

involves comparing findings against some criteria. If the report is going to people outside the

writing center, writing centers are wise to know the criteria readers hold important. Also, the

results of similar evaluations from other writing centers provide external examples for cautious

comparison. <u>Action</u>: Evaluations are useless unless they spark action. Consequently, it is

important to decide early on who might end up doing what--that is, decide on the audience and

purpose of the evaluation. If the purpose is to improve the program, and if the audience is

program personnel, the evaluation is formative. If the purpose is to decide the worth of a

program--adopt? continue? expand?--and if the audience is supervisors, consumers, or funders,

the evaluation is summative. Although this distinction blurs in practice, it has been one of the

most influential and useful concepts in evaluation.

Writing centers should emphasize summative evaluations. While formative evaluation

remains necessary for program improvement, summative evaluation answers accountability

questions from people who hold the purse strings. Precisely because summative judgments

engender fear, writing centers should initiate them. If the study is unsatisfactory—the method

flawed, the data collection crude, the results misrepresentative—the writing center can use the

study as a pilot and the results for formative work. If someone else initiates the evaluation, the

results—good, bad, or indifferent—are released to inform a summative judgment.

The most common writing center evaluation procedures—counting clients,

postconference surveys, and end-of-semester surveys—are becoming inadequate. The time-

honored method of counting heads is necessary but not sufficient, for quantity does not

necessarily equal quality.

Having students complete brief surveys immediately after one-to-one writing conferences often yields overly favorable results. For example, over a two-week period, Oklahoma State University's writing center handed out short surveys to every student who completed a conference (Leff "Authentic Assessment"). On one item, every one of the nearly two hundred students circled the highest possible Likert scale number. The evaluation consultant insisted on throwing out those data. This shocked the writing center devotees at the 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference. Both positions have merit. The data are somewhat useful because the highest ranking by all students is better than the highest ranking by, say, half the students. Yet the data are of limited use because we know all students were not equally satisfied, and the questionnaire failed to detect the variation.

The third popular evaluation method is the end-of-semester survey distributed to clients. While this gives clients time to see if the tutorial session(s) helped them, volunteerism becomes a problem. In my center's single attempt to mail clients questionnaires at the end of the semester, only 10% completed and returned the forms. The Bancroft Campus of the University of Toledo reports a 35-40% return rate (Mullin and Momenee 74). Survey experts such as Gay tell us, however, that we need at least a 60% or, preferably, an 80% return rate. Only then can we be confident that clients who return the questionnaires do not have opinions significantly different from those who did not respond.

Types of Evaluation for Writing Centers

When evaluation becomes a priority, writing centers should consult the field of educational program evaluation. After all, writing centers are educational programs that need to evaluate themselves yet lack an extensive repertoire of evaluation designs.

So how should writing centers be evaluated? I could proceed in the time-honored fashion of presenting one specific model as if it were the only reasonable choice. Similarly, I could simply present an evaluation I conducted at my writing center and recommend that you copy it. Instead I will present six general types of evaluation and critique each in my effort to choose the best type of evaluation for my center and others facing accountability demands. I will proceed in this manner partly to impart an overview of the program evaluation field. Worthen and Sanders, long-time experts in the evaluation field, warn that "during the past two decades, over 50 different evaluation models have been developed and circulated" (43). Latching onto one of the first models encountered is irresponsible, yet studying dozens of models to make an informed decision is prohibitive. Writing centers should choose from among general approaches to evaluation rather than from the myriad specific models. Learning six types of program evaluation is more sensible and efficient. Evaluation types are mid-way between specific models of evaluation on the one hand and philosophies of evaluation on the other: the types are created by grouping dozens of specific models according to their underlying assumptions. Writing center professionals should get an overview of the evaluation field so that they understand the options available. Then they can knowledgeably select a model, or they can create their own evaluation procedure congruent with the type of evaluation favored.

My other purpose for presenting all six types of evaluation is not so much informative as argumentative. I would like to surface the process of selecting an evaluation type and put the final decision in context. I also want to argue fairly that one type of evaluation is most appropriate for the summative evaluations many senior administrators are calling for. If I presented just one type, I would deprive you of the information necessary to critique the argument and make an independent decision.

Worthen and Sanders identify six types of evaluation: consumer-oriented, adversary-oriented, management-oriented, naturalistic and participant-oriented, expertise-oriented, and objectives-oriented. Table 1, which is adapted from Worthen and Sanders (152-155), summarizes the purposes, distinguishing features, benefits, and limitations of each evaluation approach. Some of these approaches serve writing centers better than others. The types of evaluation will be discussed, from least suitable to writing centers to most, by briefly defining the type, explaining how it might be implemented, and examining how well the approach suits writing centers.

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Insert Table 1 here OR earlier

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The consumer-oriented approach, judging by the name, seems to suit writing centers well, but, as defined by evaluation experts, has very limited applicability. The consumer-oriented approach features "independent reviews of educational products patterned after the Consumers Union approach" (Worthen and Sanders 87) in order to protect busy educators from the "sales ploys of the educational industry" (Worthen and Sanders 96). When writing centers survey clients or "consumers," they are most likely using one of two approaches described later: an objectives-oriented approach, estimating whether they have achieved their objectives, or a management-oriented approach, gathering information to make decisions.

The adversary-oriented approach acknowledges that bias is inevitable in evaluation, so, instead of trying to control it, attempts to balance it, usually by adopting a judicial model where different external evaluation teams present opposing points of view to a judge or jury.

A forensic approach is appropriate to consider when there is widespread interest in a controversy, and when considerable funds can be spent to hire external evaluators to prepare extensive pro and con cases leading to a summative decision. If a high-profile writing center were about to be closed, calling for a hearing might be appropriate, although the funding would probably not be available. Even if resources were available, caution is advised because this relatively undeveloped type of evaluation is fraught with weaknesses. The exciting legal paradigm obscures the fact that the evaluation should be concerned with merit not guilt, with worth not winning. Furthermore, as with court cases, adversary-oriented evaluations happen only when there is a problem, but writing centers should evaluate routinely to improve their programs and prove their worth.

Management-oriented approaches emphasize gathering information for decision-makers. A manager identifies a decision to be made, an evaluator collects information about the pros and cons of alternatives, and the manager decides what to do. This approach makes use of systems theory, as exemplified in Stufflebeam's well-known CIPP model where four areas of decision-making lead to four focuses of evaluation. A Context evaluation identifies needs and serves planning decisions. An Input evaluation looks at resources and alternative plans in order to aid structuring decisions. A Process evaluation examines how the program is being implemented so that procedures can be modified if necessary. A Product evaluation judges the success of a program so that administrators can decide to keep, terminate, or alter it.

Writing centers should be wary of the management-oriented approaches. Writing center directors can, technically speaking, be decision-makers in this approach, they may want to see themselves as such, and the approach may serve them well in evaluating their programs (see, for example, Hodgdon). But typically this type of evaluation serves senior administration. While

implementing the entire model provides a comprehensive view of what might be evaluated, and while it does supply useful information, the dangers are that responsibility for evaluation moves out of the writing center's hands, and that the evaluation procedure can be autocratic. In a management-oriented system, if a senior administrator must decide something about a writing center, "the decision-maker[,] who essentially controls the evaluation" (Worthen and Sanders 84), may not know much about the writing center and need not involve the writing center in planning the evaluation. There is a worrisome arbitrariness about it: No matter what goals the writing center has been trying to accomplish, the decision-maker can request an evaluation of anything relevant to the decision.

Naturalistic and participant-oriented approaches aim to "understand and portray the complexities of an educational activity" (Worthen and Sanders 152). The naturalistic element means that the evaluator seeks first-hand experience of the situation, studying it in situ without predefining, constraining, or manipulating it. The participant element means that all stakeholders or their representatives are usually involved in the evaluation. Evaluators acknowledge multiple realities and seek, by inductive reasoning, to understand the various perspectives, and, at the same time, evolve an appropriate methodology. They summarize and weigh their learning "in a largely intuitive fashion" (Worthen and Sanders 128).

This type of evaluation fits writing centers well in several ways. Writing centers tend to be creatures of their individual institutions, and naturalistic and participant-oriented approaches pay particular attention to context. Writing center professionals commonly talk about being on the margins, being alternative, being misunderstood, and seeing themselves radically differently from the way in which others see them, and the naturalistic and participant-oriented approaches bring to the fore different viewpoints. These approaches also fit with the general philosophy of

the writing center discourse community. The condemnation of product-outcome evaluation and the criticism of reductive, quantitative techniques, and the call for a holistic approach that accommodates pluralism and acknowledges the complexity of educational endeavors--all of this resonates with the writing center field's criticism of the nomothetic and love of the textual and intuitive.

However, naturalistic and participant-oriented evaluations may not be what senior administrators want. Such evaluations are based on personal observation and interpretation, and are by definition highly subjective. Senior managers, sensitized to bias and lobbying, probably favor hard data over soft. To highlight and better understand the concern with subjectivity, ask whether you would be as comfortable with a naturalistic and participant-oriented approach if the evaluator living in your writing center was chosen by an unsympathetic administrator.

An expertise-oriented approach relies on experts to judge the worth of a program. The approach may be a formal professional review as in accreditation, or it may be an ad hoc group or individual as when one or more consultants is hired.

Accreditation is currently not an option for writing centers, except as part of broader, institutional accreditation. Ad hoc consultants as outside evaluators is an evaluation option, and the benefits balance the drawbacks. Many things must go right for this approach to be worthwhile. Consultants and the stakeholders should agree on the evaluation criteria. For example, if the writing center wants student-centered tutoring, do administrators and hired experts agree that this is good tutoring? If so, what is the operational definition of student-centered tutoring; that is, what does it look like? Consultants and stakeholders should agree on an evaluation methodology. A site visit is not a method per se. An expert needs to gather data to make an informed decision, and the expert's preferred methods have to be acceptable to the

stakeholders. Very importantly, consultants should be credible. If they are writing center experts, senior administrators may question how vigorously professionals police themselves, and suspect that the writing center experts will put their colleagues' well-being before the interests of the institution. If the consultants are experts because the administrators hired them and granted them power, the writing center may discount the evaluation. All stakeholders should cooperate in supplying needed data, and consultants should have enough time and money so that they do not have to oversimplify a complex educational situation. If all of these things go right, the writing center and the institution will benefit, in addition, by having an external view of the operation.

Regardless, some drawbacks almost inevitably accompany evaluation by consultants. First, the results may not be replicable. How much commitment will there be to findings which would have been different if the evaluators had been different? Second, hiring consultants is usually expensive. Third, these evaluations are usually one-shot efforts rather than ongoing. Last, although the writing center may use the findings in a formative fashion, the evaluation is probably public, something the writing center might rather avoid.

Finally, an <u>objective-oriented</u> evaluation specifies objectives and determines the extent to which the objectives have been met. Although dozens of objective-based models exist, the approach generally begins by clarifying broad goals, and then defining more specific objectives. Subsequently, the evaluator finds a situation in which achievement of the objectives can be shown, develops or selects a measurement technique, collects data, and compares the performance data with the intended outcomes.

In the context of the current discussion, the objectives-oriented approach is the best type of evaluation for writing centers. Writing centers are eminently practical operations, and there is a certain force to the logic that since writing centers are trying to accomplish things, they should

see if they accomplished them. Whether trying to improve writing processes, increase self-confidence, foster critical thinking, or place writing at the center of higher education, writing centers are aiming to alter behavior, and objective-oriented evaluations specialize in documenting behavior change.

The other salient strength of the objectives-oriented approach is that it speaks to administrators and funders. Bowden reminds us that

> [h]owever the task of helping writers is conceived, writing center administrators are nonetheless held accountable to students, faculty, and administration for consistency, professionalism, and the ability to produce "results"; that is, centers must help writers, readers, and thinkers in the academic community become better at what they do. (164)

Administrators and funders generally look for results, and when they do, most are well aware that everyone reporting to them is putting the best spin possible on everything. The objectives-oriented approach typically has the focus and rigor that can assuage suspicions.

Although programs set objectives and administrators look for results, aren't individual tutoring sessions--the lifeblood of writing centers--so amorphous and varied as to be anathema to the objectives-oriented approach? Because the classic texts on how to tutor writing do not usually use the word "objective," it seems at first glance that we do not set objectives when we tutor. But we are aiming to change writing behavior. Ryan begins her popular tutor training book with "If I could tell you one thing about tutoring, it's that your real task is to make changes in the way students go about writing" (vii). So setting objectives would seem natural, and, in fact, it appears in numerous guises. In Teaching One-To-One: The Writing Conference, Harris writes extensively of the purposes of conferences, and says, "What gives shape and structure to these

conversations are the goals that drive the conference forward and the strategies used to get there"

(27). In <u>Talking about Writing: A Guide for Tutor and Teacher Conferences</u>, B. L. Clark uses the

phrase "setting priorities" (17), as do Meyer and Smith in <u>The Practical Tutor</u>. In contrast,

another popular tutor training text, <u>Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting</u>,

does not seem to give agenda setting a high priority. But every time a writing center director

talks about agreeing with the student about what to work on, or admonishes tutors to avoid

working on too many things in one conference, the talk is, indirectly, of setting objectives. Many

good tutors probably formulate objectives in their minds early in a conference—"By the end of

this session, this student will be able to do such and such"—and discuss the objectives with the

student, without ever thinking of what they are doing as establishing objectives.

The weakness of an objectives-oriented approach is not that it stills creativity or that it

often involves numbers or that it prevents one from doing whatever one wants or that it is

threatening. If used exclusively, the approach fosters tunnel vision: it can neglect the value of the

objectives themselves, it can ignore context, and it can overlook unintended outcomes. An

objectives-oriented approach should be a writing center's first choice but not its only choice of

evaluation type.

Small-Scale Evaluations

An appropriate evaluation approach may be chosen based on personal preference, the

evaluation's purpose, and the institutional context, but then the question arises as to whether the

evaluation should be full-blown or limited. The only thing wrong with writing centers'

conducting full-scale evaluations is that, with the resources normally available, it is impossible.

Instead of giving up or hastily gathering some unreliable and invalid data, writing centers should

conduct a series of carefully limited evaluations which, pieced together after a few years, create a

fairly comprehensive picture. Because I could find no term for this in the evaluation literature, I created one: "small-scale evaluations."

A small-scale evaluation has the following characteristics. It focuses on one aspect of the program at a time. For example, instead of trying to evaluate all aspects of tutoring in one semester, the writing center could focus on one concern. A center might ask, for example, whether undergraduates who voluntarily visit the center make the revisions talked about in one-to-one conferences with trained and experienced peer tutors.

A small-scale evaluation examines important aspects before secondary. Because resources are tight and the evaluation is limited, the investigation should focus on primary goals before secondary. For example, although a center may want tutors to ask many open ended questions in their tutoring, asking such questions is an avenue to a particular kind of tutoring, which, in turn, addresses the primary goal of improving students' writing processes.

Such evaluations must not be too costly, labor intensive, or time consuming. The touchstone is whether the center could repeat the evaluation sometime in the future without extraordinary funding.

Any small-scale evaluation should be part of an ongoing plan leading to a fairly comprehensive evaluation. As an example, over the last three years, the writing center at the University of Northern British Columbia has implemented the following evaluation plan. In addition to ongoing counts of various things and student opinions of tutoring and workshops, the center has conducted focus groups of students to discuss the first semester of operation, interviews with randomly selected clients to determine students' perceptions of the center as an institutional context for writing, extensive structured journaling by tutors to evaluate Level II tutor training, and a pretest-posttest evaluation of Level II tutor training employing a modified

version of Reigstad's conference categorization method. After these formative evaluations appropriate during start up, the center conducted the follow-up survey reported below as an example of a small-scale evaluation. This year the center is using Faigley and Witte's typology of textual changes to see whether students actually make in their final drafts the changes talked about during writing conferences on their rough drafts.

Ideally, such evaluations should be initiated and largely controlled by the writing center. If writing centers are not proactive in evaluating, they will eventually be told what to evaluate and how to evaluate it, and they may not like either.

While formative evaluations have their place, especially when writing centers introduce innovations, summative evaluations which can also provide information useful for improving the center should be common.

The evaluation should be credible to those controlling the funding. If a writing center is conducting a formative evaluation strictly for its own purposes, it can chose any method that suits its fancy and budget. However, if the writing center uses an approach and techniques respected by senior administrators, the evaluation can do double duty.

Because of the audience and purpose, small-scale evaluations favor objectives-oriented approaches. However, because local contexts and evaluation questions vary, other evaluation approaches have their places.

Finally, those who conduct small-scale evaluations in writing centers should share the design and the results in a manner which enables others to use the design and compare results. Contextualizing information is important to aid comparison.

An Example of a Small-Scale Evaluation

One purpose of providing this example is to clarify the foregoing discussion by showing what might result from analyzing the various evaluation approaches and accepting the idea of small-scale evaluations. The other purpose is to report the design and results of the evaluation so that readers may use the methodology and compare the findings.

The University is a new institution which serves an equal mix of urban and rural, male and female, sequential and mature students. The Learning Skills Centre (LSC) sees 15-20% of the 2,800 students every semester, most frequently students in the first, second, or third year of Natural Resources Management or Business Administration. Students visit the LSC voluntarily from across the curriculum, and they work with trained tutors who are senior undergraduates or Masters students. Although some opportunity for drop-in exists, most one-to-one writing conferences are booked ahead for 45-minute slots. The current evaluation was planned at the same time a new president arrived at the university with plans to cut and reorganize.

An objectives-oriented evaluation with a summative emphasis was chosen, focusing on the principal goal of the writing service: to improve students' writing processes. I wanted to know whether the positive evaluations students gave us when they finished conferences lasted. I wanted to know whether students learned something during conferences, were able to use that knowledge writing independently, and thought they had gained something of long-term value. By designing a telephone follow-up survey of three groups of clients, I hoped to avoid the common problems of overly positive thank-you-note evaluations immediately after conferences, and the inadequate return rate of mailed surveys.

I selected three groups of students. The Two Month Group was created early in the semester by selecting every student who had a writing conference after a certain date until 45 potential participants were found. This group was to be telephoned approximately two months

after the conference in question on the assumption that after that interval the students would have a reasonable idea if what they had learned was of long-term benefit. The Two Week Group was selected in mid-semester in the same manner and contacted about two weeks after the conference in question on the assumption that the students would have tried to apply their learning to their writing projects. Students chosen for one group (indicated by a large check mark on the front of the student files and another mark by the conference chosen) were ineligible for inclusion in another group because participating in the evaluation in one group could alert students that they many be asked follow-up questions about subsequent conferences. The Immediate Group was selected near the end of the semester but before the customary final exam panic. This group received the survey in paper-and-pencil form immediately after writing conferences.

In the introductory phase of conferences, tutors suggested objectives, discussed these with students, and then wrote the agreed-upon objectives on scrap paper. As an example, "By the end of this session, Cheryl will be able to use clustering to get ideas for essays." At the end of conferences, tutors modified the objectives if conferences went in unplanned directions. Objectives were entered in the students' files. Tutors also asked Immediate Group members to fill out an evaluation form, and members of the other groups to sign forms allowing the LSC to contact them in the future (what the LSC would contact them about was not explicit).

The short questionnaire used a six-point Likert-type scale after each of the four main items. It read as follows:

1. I am satisfied with my conference at the Learning Skills Centre.

2. I am satisfied with the objectives or topics focused on during my conference.

3. I (can) could immediately apply to my school work what I have learned during my conference.

4. What I have learned during my conference will help me in the future as a student.

5. Comments?

The telephone interview had a protocol to prevent significant variation in the way the interviews were conducted (see Appendix A). The start of the telephone interview featured the conference objective(s) in order to focus the student's attention on the skill(s) learned in the conference and away from such things as the topic, the grade, the tutor, other visits to the LSC, and so on. Statements 1 and 2 aimed to put the student at ease and thus increase the chances of an honest response to Statement 3, the key item. Similarly, the first two items were non-threatening because the student could not be at fault, and this should have increased the student's confidence so that, when item 3 came up, the student was less likely to give a socially acceptable response when certain answers could reflect negatively on him or her. Statement 3 was based on the assumption that only the student knew his or her composing process before the conference and after the conference, so the student was the best person to ask about whether it changed. Responses to Statement 4 may be somewhat hypothetical, but Statement 4 is a good way to gauge long-term effect given the impracticality of waiting years and then trying to locate an adequate number of students. Two months after a one-to-one writing conference, some students do know whether they have been able to apply what they learned in the conference to other writing projects. The survey finished with an open-ended question to give the students a chance to say whatever they wanted in conversation with the evaluator.

A graduate student was hired to conduct the evaluation. Because he worked in the LSC a few hours each week as "our data man," and because the University is small, some of the students telephoned undoubtably associated him with the LSC. This would have increased the politeness factor and produced more positive results than a truly outside evaluator would have

generated. On the other hand, his knowledge of the LSC and what the tutors did enabled him to talk with respondents when he asked for any and all comments about the Centre.

The graduate student telephoned students between 4:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., and tried to contact each participant a maximum of five times before giving up. In all, he attempted to contact 135 students, approximately half of the students who had come to the LSC for writing conferences during the semester. He reached 104 clients, and one refused to participate because he was "too busy." The Immediate Group consisted of 31 students, the Two Week Group of 30, and the Two Month Group of 42. The response rate was 76%, high enough for confidence in the results. Survey information was entered in a data base.

The results are presented in three tables, one for each group. Figures are percentages.

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Insert Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 about here

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The surveys yielded impressive results. All of the clients surveyed immediately after tutoring were satisfied with the objectives focused on in their conferences and thought they could immediately apply to their school work what they had learned. Tutors negotiated conference agendas successfully, and they helped students understand how to make writing process changes when working independently. Two weeks later, when most clients had completed the conferenced papers and many had had them graded, 83.3% agreed or agreed strongly that they were able to apply what they had learned in the conference. An impressive 86.6% said what they had learned in the conference would continue to help them in the future. This is testament to the practicality and powerful impact of the conferences. Two months after a 45-minute conference

all impact might be expected to have dissipated, but three-quarters of the clients agreed or strongly agreed that they could still apply what they had learned, and two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that it would continue to help them in the future.

The results also provided food for thought for the Center. First, the response of the Immediate Group was considerably more positive than the response of the other two groups. For example, while 64.5% of the Immediate Group expressed strong satisfaction with the conferences, only 30% of the Two Week Group and 42.9% of the Two Month Group were as enthusiastic. This casts more doubt on the validity of evaluation forms distributed immediately after conferences and suggests omitting that facet of this evaluation design in the future. Second, although none of the students surveyed immediately after sessions expressed any dissatisfaction, approximately 1 out of every 10 students contacted two weeks after tutoring expressed some dissatisfaction. The evaluation was not designed to learn why, but a future, formative evaluation could try. Third, as time went by, student enthusiasm waned, but opinions still remained largely positive. For example, 50% of Two Week Group agreed strongly that they could apply to their school work what they had learned, but only 38.1% of Two Month Group agreed. At the same time, if all three positive ratings are considered—strongly agree, agree, and mildly agree— opinion changed only slightly, from 90% to 88.1%.

According to the clients, the writing center had a valuable impact on their writing. Students who have not visited the center should be confident that they too will improve their writing processes. Professors should refer students to the center confident that the students will learn something—and something that lasts. Administrators deciding the center's budget should know that the students are highly satisfied with the help they receive and say that it makes them better writers.

When Hard Questions Are Asked

The foregoing exemplifies a small-scale evaluation. Initiated by the center as a part of an ongoing series of evaluation activities, the study focused on the center's most important objective and conducted an inexpensive evaluation credible to senior management and, simultaneously, informative for the center. The writing center field should design, conduct, and share more small-scale evaluations.

Scouring the literature reveals few examples of small-scale evaluations, but some helpful ideas. One noteworthy example is Lerner's small-scale evaluation of his writing center in a college of pharmacy. Focusing on a major outcome valued by management—higher grades as a sign of increased chances of retention—Lerner compared the grades obtained in composition courses by students who attended the writing center with the grades of those who did not. He divided the students into seven levels based on Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores ranging from 280 to 710. This not only created groups matched by ability level but allowed him to see whether students of different writing ability benefited differently from tutorial assistance. The evaluation demonstrated that "students with the weakest starting skills (according to their SAT verbal scores) came to the Writing Center most often and benefited the most. Not a bad conclusion to present to an administrator concerned about supporting and retaining academically unprepared students" (3).

Helpful ideas for small-scale evaluations can be found in several articles. Leff ("Authentic Assessment in the Writing Center") demonstrates the care with which surveys should be designed, and she reports the results of two years of surveys handed out at the end of writing conferences at Oklahoma State University's writing center. Kiedaisch and Dinitz describe how they got more use out of such surveys by requiring demographic data and then

correlating the responses to the survey questions with different demographic groups. Fielding-Pickering's clear-headed discussion of evaluating a high school computer-based writing center suggests annotating early drafts and final drafts to see whether tutorial intervention succeeded in helping students revise. Ady describes a technique particularly applicable to writing centers concerned about numbers and about students' perceptions of the center. As a composition instructor, Ady required all of his students to take a rough draft to the writing center, and then to write a description of "what happened, what worked, what didn't, and how the session affected their view of themselves as writers" (11). Hylton provides a good example of how a center can clarify objectives and choose appropriate evaluation techniques for each objective.

Fifteen years ago, Neulieb began her seminal article, "Evaluating a Writing Lab," like this: "The first problem that lab personnel have to face when considering evaluation techniques is that the process of evaluation is not at all easy. . . . First, there is no established method for going about the evaluation" (227). She concluded the chapter with the hope that the writing center field would turn its attention to evaluation and create an evaluation model. There cannot be a single evaluation design for writing centers, but there can be a variety of sound, practical, small-scale evaluation schemes planned, executed, revised, and reported for possible use by others. If a writing center asks itself hard questions, it will be better prepared "when hard questions are asked by those who read the report" (Neulieb 227-8).

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Appendix A

Learning Skills Centre Questionnaire for Telephone Survey

Student's Name _____ Date of Conference _____

Student's Phone _____ Date of Survey _____

Objective(s):_____

_____

Length of phone interview: _____ minutes

Protocol

Hello, is [name of student] there? I'm [name], and I've been hired by [the university] to conduct

an evaluation of the Learning Skills Centre. I'm wondering if you would mind talking for about

five minutes and telling me what you think of the Learning Skills Centre. Your comments will be

kept confidential.

(If no) Is there a better time to contact you?

    (If yes, take down time.)

    (If no) Thank you for your time. Good-bye.

(If yes) On [date of conference], you had a conference with someone in the Learning Skills

Centre. According to the Student File here, the objective(s) of the session was (were) [read

objective(s)]. Does that sound accurate to you?

(If no, ask the student to explain. Make certain that you are talking about the same conference.

Proceed.)

(If yes) I'll read you four statements. Please rate from 1 to 6—6 being Strongly Agree, 5 Agree,

4 Mildly Agree, 3 Mildly Disagree, 2 Disagree, and 1 Strongly Disagree—how you feel about

each statement.

1. I am satisfied with my conference at the Learning Skills Centre.

2. I am satisfied with the objectives or topics focused on during my conference.

3. I could immediately apply to my school work what I learned during my conference.

4. What I learned during my conferences will help me in the future as a student.

5. The purpose of doing this telephone survey, [name of student], is to improve the services that the Learning Skills Centre offers to you. Do you have any comments on how the Learning Skills Centre could improve or what it's doing right that it should continue?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

Table 1
Comparison of Evaluation Approaches

	Consumer-Oriented	Adversary-Oriented	Management-Oriented	Naturalistic and Participant-Oriented	Exp Orie
Purpose of Evaluation	Providing information about educational products to aid decisions about educational purchases or adoptions	Providing a balanced examination of all sides of controversial issues or highlighting both strengths and weaknesses of a program	Providing useful information to aid in making decisions	Understanding and portraying the complexities of an educational activity, responding to an audience's requirements for information	Pro pro jud qua
Distinguishing Characteristics	Using criterion checklists to analyze products, product testing, informing consumers	Use of public hearings, use of opposing points of view, decision based on arguments heard during proceedings	Serving rational decision making, evaluating at all stages of program development	Reflecting multiple realities, use of inductive reasoning and discovery, firsthand experience on site	Bas on kno exp con star tea visi
Benefits	Emphasis on consumer information needs, influence on product developers, concern with cost effectiveness and utility, availability of checklists	Broad coverage, close examination of claims, aim toward closure or resolution, illumination of different sides of issues, impact on audience, use of a wide variety of information	Comprehensiveness, sensitivity to information needs of those in a leadership position, systematic approach to evaluation, use of evaluation throughout the process of program development, well operationalized with detailed guidelines for implementation, use of a wide variety of	Focus on description *and* judgment, concern with context, openness to evolve evaluation plan, pluralistic, use of inductive reasoning, use of a wide variety of information, emphasis on understanding	Bro effi imp tim cap hun

			information		
Limitations	Cost and lack of sponsorship, may suppress creativity or innovation, not open to debate or cross-examination	Fallible arbiters or judges, high potential costs and consumption of time, reliance on investigatory and communication skills of presenters, potential irrelevancies or artificial polarization, limited to information that is presented	Emphasis on organizational efficiency and production model, assumption of orderliness and predictability in decision making, can be expensive to administer and maintain, narrow focus on the concerns of leaders	Nondirective, tendency to be attracted by the bizarre or atypical, potentially high labor intensity and cost, hypothesis generating, potential for failure to reach closure	Rep vul per. sca sup doc sup con to c inte sup con of i reli: qua "ex

Table 2

Results of the Evaluation Survey: Immediate Group[a]

Likert Rating	Statement 1: Satisfaction with Conference	Statement 2: Satisfaction with Objective(s)	Statement 3: Learning Applied to Assignment	Statement 4: Learning Helpful in Future
1 Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
2 Disagree	0	0	0	0
3 Mildly Disagree	0	0	0	0
4 Mildly Agree	0	0	0	3.2
5 Agree	35.5	41.9	25.8	25.8
6 Strongly Agree	64.5	58.1	74.2	71

[a] All figures are percentages.

Table 3

Results of the Evaluation Survey: Two Week Group[a]

Likert Rating	Statement 1: Satisfaction with Conference	Statement 2: Satisfaction with Objective(s)	Statement 3: Learning Applied to Assignment	Statement 4: Learning Helpful in Future
1 Strongly Disagree	0	0	3.3	0
2 Disagree	0	3.3	3.3	3.3
3 Mildly Disagree	13.3	6.7	3.3	3.3
4 Mildly Agree	6.7	13.3	6.7	6.7
5 Agree	50	46.7	33.3	33.3
6 Strongly Agree	30	30	50	53.3

[a] All figures are percentages.

Table 4

Results of the Evaluation Survey: Two Month Group[a]

Likert Rating	Statement 1: Satisfaction with Conference	Statement 2: Satisfaction with Objective(s)	Statement 3: Learning Applied to Assignment	Statement 4: Learning Helpful in Future
1 Strongly Disagree	2.4	0	0	0
2 Disagree	0	2.4	4.8	2.4
3 Mildly Disagree	2.4	2.4	7.1	2.4
4 Mildly Agree	16.7	14.3	14.3	28.6
5 Agree	35.7	50	35.7	26.2
6 Strongly Agree	42.9	31	38.1	40.5

[a] All figures are percentages.