

UWC MONTHLY

A publication of the James Madison University Writing Center

September/October 2013

The University Writing Center: Coming Soon to a Classroom Near You

There is a myth about the University Writing Center (UWC)—that it is some kind of repair shop for misfit papers. Unfortunately, there is no magic wand that can be waved to fix writing errors, but there are many resources that can aid students on their journey through the writing process.

To clarify any misconceptions that members of the JMU community may have, the UWC offers in-class introduction presentations to promote the Writing Center's services and workshops to assist students with specific writing-related topics.

There are two presentation options that professors can choose from, depending on what their specific needs are. The first is a 10–15 minute presentation that reviews the basic services that the UWC offers and what to expect from a consultation. The second option is a more targeted 45-minute workshop on a variety of writing-related topics.

A list of available workshop topics is sent out to faculty members at the beginning of each semester. Workshop topics include personal writing, research writing, revision, and editing. All workshops are customizable to suit the specific writing needs of a course.

In 2011, Paige Normand, the Interim Communication Center Coordinator, organized a group of UWC and Communication Center tutors to form the first team of student presenters. During the 2012–2013 school year, the group completed ninety-eight classroom visits (forty-six introduction presentations and fifty-two workshops), helping approximately 2,600 students! This number is staggering considering how new the resource is.

These presentations are imperative to getting the word out that the Writing Center is a place where collaborative efforts occur with faculty and peer tutors in order to improve students' writing processes as a whole. Normand stated that these presentations help to “frame the expectations of the Writing Center for students and faculty.” They can also help bridge the gap between students' writing perceptions and the expectations of their professors.

All faculty requests for in-class presentations and workshops can be arranged by contacting Paige Normand (normanap@jmu.edu).

-Allison Michelli, Peer Tutor



Faculty member Paige Normand presenting to a class.

Photo credit: Allison Michelli

The Magic Numbers

September/October

Wilson Hall sessions: 354/503
Carrier Library sessions: 62/80
Rose Library sessions: 58/47
APC sessions: 35/27
Total: 509/701
In-Class Presentation attendance: 523/155
Link Library visits: 445/448

Brian Caperton Brings Psych Perspective to UWC's Graduate Students

Many students, worried that their major has trapped them into certain career choices, will be paralyzed from pursuing interdisciplinary opportunities. There are, however, success stories of students breaking the mold, such as Psychology grad student Brian Caperton. When told about an opening at the University Writing Center, he wanted to seize the chance to help students, even though his primary training was in Psychology—not writing. Caperton's perseverance paid off because he will be bringing his Psychology roots and love of public service to the UWC this fall. Caperton is part of a continued movement to bring related disciplines into the Writing Center fold. He will be working alongside current undergraduate tutors like Adrian Jarvis, Caroline Prendergast, Erik Simmons, Christiana McGuigan, and Chris Deitrick, who also have backgrounds in Psychology.

Caperton was interested in community service from an early age. Because his grandparents were missionaries, he experienced the joys of traveling and helping others when he was young. Caperton said that he had always hoped to get involved with something on campus that focused on helping other students. Dr. Bill Evans, the professor who taught his senior capstone on "Service Leadership," turned him on to the Writing Center. "[Service Leadership] seems like a paradox—being a leader and being a servant," said Caperton, "But it's really not. It's like being in a writing consultation as a tutor: the leadership position is there, but it's all about serving the student and meeting the student's needs."

The desire to serve the JMU community was one of Caperton's primary motivators when he decided to meet with the Director of Learning Centers, Dr. Kurt Schick, and discuss the opportunity for employment. Initially, Caperton, who would be the first Psychology graduate tutor in the center, was worried about making the jump from Psychology. Now, he considers it an opportunity to take initiative and to forge new connections. "I didn't know if a psych student was going to be a good fit," said Caperton, about his initial hesitation to seek out the job. During his talks with Schick, however, he found that they shared similar ideas about

investment and collaboration with students. "He seemed interested in diversifying and adding new disciplines to the Writing Center for a fresh perspective," said Caperton.

Shortly thereafter, Caperton was brought on board at the Writing Center as a graduate student tutor and is undergoing training on how to bring his psychosocial perspective to a writing consultation. "Psychology and the Writing Center are both about investing in human resources: finding what makes them tick, what defines them, and trying to help," said Caperton. In Caperton's opinion, going from Service Leadership and Psychology to tutoring in the UWC is becoming more and more of a seamless transition.



Brian Caperton sitting in the Graduate Assistants office.

Photo credit: Kristin Gatti

"I don't consider myself an expert in writing—and I've told that to Jared [the UWC Coordinator] and Dr. Schick," said Caperton, "but I do know where my expertise is, and I'll need others in the Writing Center to fill the gaps in my knowledge.... This is what I'm all about—community learning and leadership." Brian Caperton will soon start tutoring in the Writing Center, and has mentioned how thankful he is for the opportunity: "Everyone has been so encouraging and I'm really looking forward to it."

-Rudy Barrett, Peer Tutor

Sharing the Tutoring Craft with English Language Learners

The language barriers that many English Language Learners (ELLs) face make the transition to college assignments difficult, particularly when editing the work of another student whose native language is English. A group of JMU Writing Center tutors and Faculty Fellows recently published an article in the *Second Language Writing Interest Section* newsletter concerning this issue. This group included English Language Learner Services coordinator Kristen Shrewsbury, librarian and UWC Faculty Fellow Reba Leiding, and four peer tutors: Melissa Psallidas, Haley Cline, Alexa Livezey and Kellie Harlow.

They co-authored the article through Google Docs, which was itself an experiment of socially-constructed learning, according to Shrewsbury. The article was the culmination of a year-long study which sought to determine the best pedagogical practices for tutoring English Language Learners to peer-edit a native speaker's essay.

In their interactions with ELLs, the group noticed that the students had a persistent fear of peer-editing exercises in their classes because they felt intimidated about critiquing a native speaker's writing. They felt inadequately prepared to question the language, arguments, and cultural and social conventions in a native English speaker's paper because they felt that they did not have access to the

dominant discourse of academia. Because ELLs are often approaching assignments from a linguistic framework that values different logical and rhetorical constructions, exercises like peer-editing are especially unnerving.

After reviewing recent writing center literature, Shrewsbury's group confirmed that educating ELLs on writing center practice and pedagogy provided these students with the academic language necessary to discourse in the academic environment. Teaching them to critique a piece of writing according to its organization, structure and rhetoric gave them the power and confidence to critique native speakers' essays.

Another unforeseen benefit was that the Writing Center tutors improved their own tutoring because they had to reflect on writing center practices and transmit those theories to the ELL clients who were not familiar with the terminology. This caused them to turn a critical eye on their own practices, assessing whether current writing center pedagogy is effective in all linguistic and cultural formats. The group concluded that all participants in this scenario—the clients, the tutors, the ESL specialists and the native-speaking students in the clients' classes—benefitted from “the value of sharing our [writing center] craft.”

- Daniel Zimmerman, Graduate Student

Alumnus Martin Steger: Employing UWC Skills as Publications Specialist

When UWC alumnus Martin Steger left JMU in 2011, he wasn't without employable skills—but as many recent graduates find themselves, he was without a job. While at school, he was a SMAD and WRTC double major, and in 2009 he joined the Writing Center. Most students looking to join the Writing Center first go through the WRTC Tutoring Writing class; Steger, due to a scheduling conflict, had to take Teaching Writing as his introductory course. Despite this somewhat unconventional start, he spent the next four semesters helping peers and gaining useful professional skills.

One of the most important skills he developed was in being a more effective communicator. Because of the Writing Center, Steger says, “I can ask clear questions when something doesn't make sense in a document, and,” he adds, “tutoring made me better at diagnosing global or repeating problems.” When dealing with large texts at his current job, he is able to understand the document by reading only a portion, which saves valuable time.

(continued on next page)

Before that, though, he did what most jobless college grads do: “I applied to as many things as I could, over the course of [the] miserable, mostly unemployed year following my graduation,” he remembers. “It’s currently a buyer’s market in the employment world. Because unemployment is so high, companies have all the leverage.”

In those many job applications, Steger showcased his time at the Writing Center, citing his ability to identify problems and communicate well with writers. “Around my 180th job application, I got an interview to be a temporary proof-reader at The Great Courses. I got the gig and...they hired me permanently earlier this year.” In fact, he is “certain” that his two years of professional experience at the Writing Center is what helped him land the job.

The Great Courses is a company offering college-level video and audio courses on a wide array of subjects: “everything from cooking to calculus,” says Steger. His role there is as a Publications Specialist, which he explains “is a fancy-but-vague way of saying ‘editor.’” It is interesting, though, that he ended up in this position. From his somewhat-editorial beginnings in the Writing Center—which began unconventionally with the Teaching Writing course—he ended up editing for a company whose goal is to teach.

Of course, he left the Writing Center with experiences beyond just the professional realm. He made “several lasting friendships, with both professors and peers,” and spent two “life-changing trips” with the Alternative Break Program. While this may seem unrelated to the UWC, for Steger, they go hand in hand. It was a fellow tutor who invited

him on the trip to Belize in 2010, and the following year, he travelled to Costa Rica as trip-leader. On both trips, the current UWC Coordinator, Jared Featherstone, was the faculty leader, and the experiences centered around a writing course.

While the UWC left its mark on him, Steger also remains a part of the ongoing work there. He is found in videos on the website that help faculty better communicate writing assignments to their students, and he played an integral role in the “Super Tutors” video that educates students on what the Writing Center can do as well. Both are available resources that still affect the JMU writing community.

Steger’s advice for tutors soon to be entering the job market is to keep an optimistic outlook. “If you’re struggling in the job hunt and become discouraged, don’t bring it into a job interview. After months of unemployment, I was unsettled and frustrated, and it showed [in an interview]—and that didn’t sit well with the interviewer. I’m never one to act overly positive when I’m not, but that’s a situation where you really have to.”

-Maya Chandler, Peer Tutor



Martin Steger on th APB trip to Belize.

Tutoring Writing Transforms Throughout the Years

Every semester, aspiring tutors participate in an intense training course designed to prepare them for a job in the University Writing Center; what many don’t know is that the course has been evolving since its creation in 2007. Started by the Learning Centers’ Director, Kurt Schick, the design of Tutoring Writing combines tutoring theory and practice into one course. Rather than a few hours of crash training, this unique, semester-long class serves as a durable learning experience that provides students

opportunities to build their expertise through in-class practice as well as a hands-on apprenticeship component. The assignments and activities within the class enhance the experience, and while the basic structure has remained the same, each professor has added new elements to help give apprentice tutors the tools they need.

Prior to 2007, only faculty members worked in the UWC, and Schick wanted to incorporate peer tutors into the

center. To ensure their success, he designed a training course inspired by a presentation given by the Houston International Writing Centers Association, and proposed it as part of the WRTC curriculum. Once accepted by the department, Schick taught the first class to a group of about ten students.

Following the early semesters of the course, WRTC professor and former faculty tutor Karen McDonnell took the reins. One of the biggest changes McDonnell made was the addition of Link Library presentations, based on feedback that practicing tutors wanted more instruction on fundamentals, like grammar mechanics. The Link Library is a collection of useful writing resources, which are accessed through the UWC website, and cover a range of topics—from the writing process, to grammar and punctuation. A new resource at the time, it made sense to familiarize students with what was there, so apprentice tutors signed up to teach mini-lessons to their peers. In discussing her approach to the class, McDonnell said, “I shared...examples of my own scholarly work and presentation materials to help students see that the Writing Center was a source of rich intellectual conversation and research.”

After the McDonnell generation, UWC Coordinator Jared Featherstone shaped the course with the addition of mindfulness meditation instruction. Featherstone explained, “We want tutors to be open, empathetic, and attentive. This practice helps them do it. We meditated for a few minutes at the start of each class and discussed our experiences.” As attention and anxiety are common in tutoring, practicing mindful meditation in the classroom gives aspiring tutors a method for focusing their attention, calming the mind, and in turn, developing awareness about their own judgments. Learning how to make appropriate judgments is important as a tutor, so Featherstone also incorporated a guest speaker from the counseling center into the class. Tutors in training learn how to validate students’ concerns and realize when the problem may go well beyond writing.

This semester, UWC Peer Educator Laura Schubert is teaching the class, and like McDonnell, she has used feedback from current tutors in the center to inform her changes to the course structure. In response to the growing number of writers who learned English as a second language, Schubert provided more instruction on working with multilingual writers, to help tutors feel more confident when tutoring English Language Learners. She is integrating a two-week long unit in which students look at non-Western genres of writing and have the opportunity to interview a multilingual writer. In examining these texts, Schubert said, “My hope is that students will be more well-versed in the features of Western and non-Western genres and more aware of multilingual writers’ unique challenges.”

With each professor’s attention to what aspiring tutors need in order to be prepared for a job with the UWC, it’s no surprise that the training course has continued to develop so successfully over the years. But the course never really ends, as this substantial tutor training experience continues through weekly professional development meetings and various exchanges of unique perspectives. As new professionals and peer tutors continue to move through the Writing Center, they too add to the course and the culture it fosters.

-Kristin Gatti, Peer Tutor



Students meditating in Jared Featherstone’s Spring 2013 Tutoring Writing class.

UWC Monthly

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Road to the Writing Center

The University Writing Center Faculty Fellows have diverse and rich backgrounds—but none quite like new Fellow Stephen Briggs. Rocker-turned-writer Stephen Briggs' winding road has led him to JMU and writing many times. He initially came to JMU as an undergraduate and enrolled in a number of writing-intensive classes. Though he thoroughly enjoyed these courses, Briggs ended up transferring to the University of Washington. There, he combined his writing roots with Philosophy to earn a bachelor's degree in Humanities.

After graduating, Briggs wanted to pursue the music he had started in college. He went on tour with his band and took time to travel the U.S. while writing on the side. His travels took him all over the country, from Virginia to Washington, New Mexico, Los Angeles, and Maine. When Briggs was in L.A., he got into the film industry as a screenplay editor for several production companies. Even though he loved the people and scene on the West Coast, Briggs felt a longing for the Shenandoah Valley and its community, so he picked up and left California to return to the Harrisonburg area.

Briggs lived in Staunton for a couple of years, where he worked as a film columnist for *The News Leader* and as a freelance writer. He loved the Valley, the people, and his writing; unfortunately, the recession in 2008 had other plans for Briggs. When it hit, on top of hurting the newspaper he was working for, the recession dried up all of the freelance writing work. Briggs took this misfortune as an opportunity to “develop even further as a writer.” He went back to school, to the University of Southern Maine, for an MFA in non-fiction.

It was only after getting his Master's degree that Briggs realized that he not only had a knack for writing, but also loved teaching. “I wanted to stay in that academic environment; I really loved working with people who were passionate about learning,” he says, when talking about his choice to teach. When it came time to decide where to apply, Briggs knew he missed the Valley area, so returning JMU was an easy decision.

This is what allowed him to return once more to the Harrisonburg area to write. He has been a teacher for three years now in the WRTC department. He wanted to be more fully immersed in writing on JMU's campus, so this Fall he became a Faculty Fellow at the UWC. After joining the center, Briggs felt more effective in student conferences for his classes and says, “I just really like the one-on-one aspect to it.” Briggs finds that not only in conferences but in tutoring, he can “tailor [the session] to the student's needs,” which makes it easier for him to continue impacting students while allowing them the freedom of influencing the direction of the session.

He is currently in the Tutoring Writing course, and is enthusiastic about the curriculum and its applications. Briggs mentions that there are a lot of things about teaching and tutoring that tie into one another and how “each one informs the other.” He looks forward to his time at the Writing Center and wants to not only improve students' writing on campus, but also make an impact on JMU writing culture.

- Nathan Gallagher, Peer Tutor



Stephen Briggs in the University Writing Center.

University Writing Center

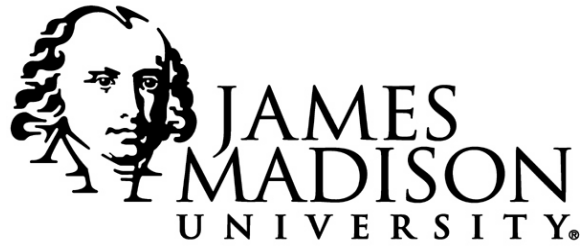
www.jmu.edu/uwc

The University Writing Center offers:

- Free individualized writing help for all students and faculty
- In-class workshops on a variety of writing topics
- Hundreds of writing links collected on the UWC website

Locations and Hours

- Wilson Hall: Mon-Thurs 9-5, Fri 9-noon
- Carrier Library: Mon-Wed, 7-10 p.m.
- Rose Library: Mon-Wed, 7-10 p.m.
- Athletic Performance Center: Mon/Wed 6:30-9:30 p.m.



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