

“Make the Appointments Obligatory”: The Cultural and Institutional Challenges of a US Expatriate’s Efforts to Establish a University Writing Center in Norway

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Abstract

In the US, writing centers have a long history at institutions of higher learning. Often housed in individual colleges, writing centers function to help both undergraduate and graduate students develop their writing skills and become more confident, independent writers. Assistance, which is typically offered by students who are themselves seasoned writers, takes form in both face-to-face and online tutoring sessions and can focus on tenets of writing ranging from general skills (e.g., outlining, drafting, organization) to discipline- or genre-specific assignments (e.g., theses, reports, presentations). In recent years, efforts have been made to transfer the writing center culture to European higher education, where success stories have emerged in a wide range of countries. Yet several scenarios within these contexts have yet to be investigated. This study, which took place at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology’s (NTNU) Department of Teacher Education (Institutt for lærerutdanning), sought to examine the challenges faced by a non-native Norwegian’s efforts to establish a writing center by balancing the transfer of US-centric writing center tenets with the context of Norwegian academia. In autumn 2019, 43 pre-service teachers in their second year taking a course on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) were obligated to make one appointment with the writing center to discuss drafts of a paper for a required assignment. Afterwards, they completed a survey detailing the experience of their visit. Results revealed that while students on the whole benefited from the sessions to discuss their writing, the students also expressed a desire for the sessions to be obligatory, which runs counter to the long-established writing center best practice of sessions being voluntary.

Keywords: writing center, European higher education, writing feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

For nearly a century, US institutions of higher education have seen an upsurge in the number of writing centers (Murphy & Law, 1994). The primary function of these centers is to assist students – both undergraduate and graduate – with their writing needs. Over time, as writing centers have expanded their reach, a pressing need has emerged for the centers to address the myriad challenges that accompany their increasing responsibilities. Writing center scholarship in recent decades has addressed a wide range of topics, ranging from the logistics of establishing a writing center (Reichelt, et al., 2013) to writing center best practices (Moberg, 2010), to the reconsideration or questioning of those practices (Boquet & Lerner, 2008).

Writing centers have also begun to pop up in European institutions of higher education (Girgensohn, 2012). Not surprisingly, several related dilemmas – institutional and otherwise – have also been chronicled in writing center scholarship; yet because of the new context, these dilemmas often differ from those present in US institutions (Girgensohn, 2012). One such example is the need to adopt to local writing practices when a writing center is founded (Turner, 2006). While several studies have examined a variety of academic contexts in Europe pertaining to the challenges of establishing or maintaining a writing center (see, for instance, Reichelt, et al., 2013), none has addressed the potential cultural tensions that may arise when the individual who attempts to establish the writing center is still learning about the academic and cultural norms of the university in which the writing center will be situated. By adopting the context of higher education in Norway as a backdrop, the purpose of this study was to consider a US expatriate's efforts to establish a writing center at an institution of higher education in Norway while taking into account the perceptions of pre-service teachers' experiences with a writing center session at a newly established writing center.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: The Writing Center – History and Principles

While writing centers are a relatively recent phenomenon in Europe, their presence in US institutions of higher education dates back to the 1930's (Carino, 1995). During the 1930's, the goal of writing was to imitate a "product" and abide by set writing standards. Nearly half a century later, in the 1970's and 1980's, a paradigm shift occurred in which the focus moved

away from the text and towards the writer (Murphy & Law, 1994). Writing centers subscribed to this model, called the expressivist model, which celebrated the writer's intellectual and creative capacities (Murphy & Law, 1994). Yet writing was still looked upon as a solitary endeavor; it was not until the late 1980's that a social constructivist view of writing emerged, one that still exists today. Writing center pedagogy, in turn, began to focus on sociocultural dimensions such as collaboration, the construction of knowledge, negotiation of meaning, and a minimizing of the tutor's role as authority figure (Murphy & Law, 1994).

Over time, several other facets of writing philosophy have come to inform writing center best practices. Many of these practices have derived from North's (1984) declaration that the goal is "to produce better writers, not better writing," which is accomplished by tutors who observe and participate in a meaningful conversation about writing and employ a student-centered approach (p. 438). Such an approach is often encapsulated in an enquiry-based method that places the element of discovery and choice-making on the students (Moussu, 2013). This manifestation of student agency can be witnessed via a holistic approach to a text that focuses on higher-order concerns such as a writer's ideas, draft progression, and the discursive nature of writing, and also aims to develop the writer's intellectual capabilities (Brannon, 1989; Moussu, 2013). A writing center philosophy is marked by the practices it avoids as well, namely an emphasis on "cleaning up" local or sentence-level issues such as punctuation and spelling. A final distinguishing element of a writing center pertains to functionality. Students schedule (free) appointments of their own volition, and the tutors neither assign nor grade the students' texts that are under scrutiny (Moussu, 2013). It is believed that students benefit more from voluntary visits, as they showcase students' intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) motivation, whereas obligatory visits may engender negative attitudes about writing centers and writing in general (Rendleman, 2013). As writing centers continue to progress, however, Boquet and Lerner (2008) caution against the wholesale subscription to writing center best practices (what over the years has come to be referred to as "lore"), as these practices are too often applied without thorough examination; this calls into question their utility, particularly in foreign contexts.

2.2: General and Cross-cultural Writing Center Challenges

Despite developments, progress in writing center pedagogy has been accompanied by numerous challenges. In a general sense, writing centers must strike a balance between the often conflicting goals of the tutor and the institution, such as respecting students' obligation to abide by coursework expectations and encouraging students to be creative and establish their voice (Murphy & Law, 1994). Writing centers can thus be at odds with the educational process of the institution, as they often struggle to define and validate themselves (Murphy & Law, 1994). Several studies have also highlighted financial and logistical concerns (see, for example, Reichelt, et al., 2013). Other concerns run the gamut, including the motivation for the center's establishment; recruitment and support of staff; location; equipment and resources; advertising; management and funding structures; and quality assurance strategies (Farrell, O'Sullivan, & Tighe-Mooney, 2015).

Yet other obstacles, particularly those that pertain to the establishment and preservation of writing centers outside of North America, emanate from cross-cultural dilemmas, specifically the need to reconceptualize what has historically been a distinctly American academic institution in order to serve the writing needs of students in an entirely different context. In many European universities, for instance, though the number of first-year writing courses is on the rise, these courses tend to be grass-roots initiatives established by study programs or individual instructors rather than the university itself (Kruse, 2013). It is still less common for obligatory foundational writing courses to exist, which as a consequence potentially positions the writing center as a de facto writing program (Santa, 2009). Similarly, because writing can vary greatly across cultures, L1 culture and language affect conceptions of and approaches to writing (Severino, 2011); an appreciation of these differences is thus critical in writing center pedagogical approaches and best practices (Santa, 2009). In this sense, a scholarly consensus recommends that writing centers adapt to local writing practice and culture, rather than import it from the US or elsewhere (Bräuer, 2002; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2013; Santa, 2009; Ronesi, 2009; Turner, 2006). In short, universally-valid advice regarding writing centers should be trumped by the individual contexts of the centers (Girgensohn, 2012).

2.3: Academic Writing and Writing Centers in Norway

Historically, the Norwegian university tradition for students and faculty has been embodied by the notion of academic freedom, which calls into question whether students need to attend lectures or write papers (Dysthe, 2003). Yet in recent decades, the importance of proficiency in academic writing in Norwegian higher education has evolved considerably, in part because the number of written assignments required of students has expanded (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2017). The “Quality Culture in Higher Education” white paper (2017), issued by the Ministry of Education and Research as an academic reform aimed at increasing the success rate of students, criticizes study programs in which students receive good grades in spite of relatively low time commitment. As a counter, the paper emphasizes a more collaborative approach to learning, one in which teachers inspire students to live up to their potential by offering support and feedback, as well as the establishment of in-depth and transformational learning through collaboration, subject matter discussion and reflection, and a shared responsibility to seek improvement. Such a philosophy would likely address the challenge of new students accepting that while their newfound independence at university does not require them to attend all classes, there may no longer be a support system in place to assure that they are making progress and accomplishing their work (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015). In this sense, the motivation for having instructors play a more active role in student learning is not to undermine students’ academic freedom, but rather to engage students head-on with pedagogies that help them capitalize on educational opportunities. In short, because students may be unprepared for the degree of independence required of them to successfully engage with their studies (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015), a more proactive role on the part of both instructors and students may help students to succeed academically.

Implementing these reforms has been problematic, however, largely because new university students, as they transition from upper secondary school, are not adequately prepared for the rigor of university academics (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015). Students lack confidence in their writing and feel they do not receive adequate training and follow-up regarding their academic writing development (Hambro, et al., 2019). Despite this lack of preparation, students are expected to have acquired the requisite academic literacy skills upon entering university, as instructors tend to focus on subject-specific matters and course content rather than the teaching of academic literacy (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2017). Consequently,

recently matriculated university students may face a wide array of barriers. For instance, students may require guidance and strategies to develop meta-awareness about texts and textual practices (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2016). Other barriers may include a struggle to adapt to discipline-specific literacy practices (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2017), limited knowledge about the writing process (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2012), and written work characterized by poor language and lack of structure (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015). It has been suggested that these problems stem, in part, from the fact that writing instruction in upper secondary school takes place in the Norwegian subject, and is conducted to a much lesser extent in subject-specific courses (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015). It could thus be argued that these issues would be exacerbated as students transition not only to discipline-specific university writing, but to English-language medium writing as well.

With the rise of writing centers in Norwegian higher education, several studies pertaining to writing centers have been conducted. Straume (2017) examines the academic functions of a writing center and the conditions that factor into a writing center's efforts to legitimize itself into its surroundings. In another study, Straume (2020) discusses approaches to tutoring writing in conjunction with the importance of understanding Norwegian students' fears about writing and the challenge of having these students engage with the drafting process and the use of models in writing development. It has also been suggested that writing centers have the potential to play a pivotal role in helping university students develop knowledge of academic literacy and skills of academic writing (Hambro, et al., 2019).

Situated within the context of Norwegian higher education and the aforementioned challenges of adapting to academic writing expectations as students transition from upper secondary school to university, the purpose of this study was to investigate the cultural and institutional challenges, as seen through the eyes of a US expatriate, of establishing a writing center in a foreign context. The study took place at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology's Institutt for lærerutdanning (Department of Teacher Education), located in Trondheim, Norway. The study's rationale also heeds Santa's (2009) call for more attention to be paid to writing center employees working in a variety of academic cultures around the world.

3. METHOD

3.1: Theory

Grimm (2009) proposes three frameworks for writing centers, each of which is situated within and bolstered by 21st-century linguistic and cultural realities. The first, Global Englishes, distances itself from the idea of a “standard” English and embraces multilingualism and the varieties of English throughout the world. The second redefines literacy, highlighting multiple discourse systems and modes of representation (e.g., dialects, registers, contexts). The third, which suggests that students are “designers of social futures,” suggests that literacy education “is not about having students learn to reproduce and recognize available designs but about having students enact the transformative possibilities in design” (pp. 21-22).

In short, as a means to inform current and future writing center philosophy and pedagogy, these frameworks fuse modern-day cultural and linguistic realities with the belief that students should play a pivotal role in the advancement of their own education. To this end, this study is informed by an amalgam of these three frameworks. Specifically, I do not consider the cultural and institutional challenges described in this paper as foundational points that can be used to establish and shape a writing center based on US-centric, culturally-conditioned conceptions of what a writing center is or should be; rather, these challenges serve to devise a blueprint for a writing center that places front and center the writing norms and expectations of the undergraduate students attending the institution of higher education under examination. In my efforts as a non-Norwegian to establish a writing center at a Norwegian university, for instance, it is vital for me to recognize that writing centers are a relatively recent phenomenon at universities in Norway (Dysthe, 2003).

As education becomes increasingly transnational, it is important for educators to develop a better understanding of the purpose and context of writing in foreign academic settings. As Thaiss (2012) notes, “The desire of universities throughout the world to internationalize their student populations... should spark interest in the cultural attitudes toward written literacy that students bring with them to new places and to very different learning environments” (p. 9). Though undergirded by Grimm’s (2009) frameworks and Thaiss’s (2012) transnational writing perspectives, my study turns the tables somewhat: rather than focus on the knowledge and experiences students bring “to new places,” this study

considers the perspectives of an expatriate instructor who must adapt not to what students bring with them, but what they maintain in a place where they have long resided.

3.2: Background and Context

In spring 2018, as a doctoral student in foreign language/ESL education at the University of Iowa, I worked in the College of Education's Writing Resource as both a synchronous, face-to-face tutor and an online, asynchronous tutor for other post-graduate students. In autumn 2018, upon obtaining my PhD, I worked for one semester as a visiting assistant professor and interim director of the Writing Resource; in the latter role, I continued to tutor students, but also oversaw the logistics of the departmental writing center and the work and scheduling of several tutors.

In spring 2019, I began working as an Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education (Institutt for lærerutdanning) at NTNU. In autumn 2019, I took the first steps of establishing a departmental writing center by creating a website and purchasing an online scheduler for student appointments. I was (and still am) the director of the writing center and its only tutor; most appointments have been held face-to-face in my office, but a few have been held online.

The participants in this study were 43 pre-service teachers in the second year of a five-year program, who in autumn 2019 were taking a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) course I was teaching. For their final assignment, students designed a CLIL lesson plan and wrote a one-page summary that summarized the core principles of CLIL and their connection to the lesson plan.

As part of a two-pronged effort, namely, to aid students with their assignment and to promote the writing center, I required students to make one appointment with me to discuss their progress and concerns on their assignment. The CLIL course instruction and assignments, as well as all interactions during writing center appointments, were conducted in English. The classes in this program at NTNU are conducted in English, a course of action that has been employed by several universities in recent years not only to help native Norwegians improve their English-language skills, but also as a business and political impetus to attract international students to Norway (Ljosland, 2011). One aspect, then, of adopting

local writing practices entails conducting the writing center sessions in English to align with the English-language medium of course instruction and coursework assignments.

Given the nature of this study, my role as researcher-participant must be addressed. First, as an instructor, I taught the CLIL course the students were taking. Second, I served as both the founder of and sole tutor at the Institutt for lærerutdanning Writing Center. Third, I also functioned as the researcher who was conducting the study. These three roles worked in tandem to inform my positionality in the study, namely my role as “collaborative partner.” In a collaborative partnership, the researcher is a complete participant, and this identity is fully disclosed to the participants (Merriam, 2009). In such an approach, an increased sense of collaborative ownership ensues for both the researcher and the participant (Patton, 2002).

As previously noted, as a general rule (one that is broken in this study), writing center sessions tend to be voluntary and writing center tutors do not grade tutees’ work (Moussu, 2013). Yet limited mandatory sessions do occur on occasion (Salem, 2016), and results have revealed several positive outcomes, including increased intrinsic motivation and an increased number of student drafts (Rendleman, 2013). Further, I attempted to reconcile my myriad roles in this study during the tutoring sessions by focusing on writing center best practices, which would be differentiated from scheduled office visits with professors, who are likely unfamiliar with and thus do not adopt these practices. For instance, the writing center sessions in this study were student-led; specifically, although students were required to make an appointment, they were free to choose what elements of their paper they wanted to discuss. In this sense, the appointments mirrored typical writing center sessions, in which points of discussion are driven by the students’ concerns rather than those of the instructors.

3.3: Data Collection and Analysis

After visiting the writing center, students completed a semi-structured survey (see Appendix) to share their thoughts about their appointment as well as their general approaches or strategies to academic writing. Data analysis was undergirded by the objective of spotlighting the students’ writing needs and writing conceptions. To this end, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were adopted (Merriam, 2009). Open coding entailed reading through data for broad and repetitive themes. Axial coding encompassed determining which of these themes potentially tied to institutional or cultural challenges of establishing a writing center in

a foreign context. Finally, selective coding entailed determining which, if any, of these challenges might hinder efforts towards the establishment of the writing center.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are divided into two sections. The first section, namely what students found helpful about their writing center visits, serves to situate the establishment of a writing center in a relatively new context. In other words, the facets of the writing center visits that students found helpful can potentially play a critical role in determining what writing center best practices – despite deriving from US-based experiences and scholarship – might find similar success in other contexts. The second, namely what students found challenging or would like to change about their writing center visits, lends insight into the critical role that the perceptions of visitors to a writing center can play in its establishment.

4.1: Benefits

In terms of benefits, the most common theme that emerged was the appreciation of individualized feedback. As one student noted, “The answers to my questions were not ‘standard,’ but were catered to my text and specific concerns.” The face-to-face, one-on-one sessions presumably also helped to illuminate the emergence of other themes of positive response, such as orality. Several students mentioned, for instance, that oral feedback enabled them to ask questions and gain more clarity about their writing. One student asserted that the nature of the session was beneficial in that “both the reader and the writer get to mention their thoughts.” Another student found it useful “to discuss whether I have understood the task”; a similar sentiment was expressed by several others, who suggested that their writing center visits enabled them to learn whether their work was headed in the right direction. Allusions to the benefits of oral feedback – as a supplement to written feedback – were summed up aptly by a student who wrote, “It gave me the opportunity to both see and hear what should be improved.”

Writing center sessions also served as a platform for student agency. Specifically, while students appreciated being able to ask questions and procure feedback, the sessions also enabled them to turn the tables by disputing feedback or justifying their textual choices. As one student noted, “I found it helpful to be able to hear the tutor’s thoughts... and to explain

myself.” Because students were afforded the opportunity to ask questions privately, their agency was also instantiated through individualized expression and the avoidance of misunderstandings.

In the surveys, several students also alluded to the process approach to writing, which highlights the discursive, protracted nature of writing through drafting rather than solely a focus on the final product. As one student stated, “I found it helpful that I got to ask questions regarding my text assignment during the writing process rather than before or after.” Similarly, while all students received feedback on their texts during the sessions, several noted that the feedback enabled them to keep working on their texts; the continuity of writing, in this sense, also alludes to a process approach. Although most students made only one appointment, five students made multiple appointments to discuss progress on their drafts. A final element in students’ responses with ties to a process approach to writing was reflection; as one student noted, the writing center visit “forces us to reflect over what we are wondering about.”

Not surprisingly, not every facet of students’ responses was positive. For instance, while most students seemed to benefit from the oral feedback inherent in the writing center session, one student referred to the added cognitive burden of a face-to-face session: “A challenge was that when it is a conversation you have to remember what’s being said.” Other students also expressed their desire for more comments on their assignment, as well as a greater overall impression of their writing. However, only three of 43 students mentioned in their surveys that they would not visit the writing center again, an overwhelming positive consensus. As one student asserted, the feedback procured through face-to-face sessions “would be difficult to convey otherwise.”

4.2: Challenges

Numerous challenges arose through the writing center sessions as well; relatedly, this section is noticeably longer, as the perceived challenges – rather than the benefits – act as a constraint to the successful establishment or maintenance of a writing center, and thus deserve greater scrutiny. To this end, this section categorizes two types of challenges: those pertaining to conceptions of Norwegian academic culture, and those pertaining to differing conceptions of what a writing center might embody.

Norwegian academic culture

If an overriding theme surfaced regarding students' conceptions of Norwegian academic culture – and how, in turn, that culture might render in vain the efforts to establish a writing center – it is that academic work should be conducted independently. On the one hand, this sentiment was revealed at the university level, with students suggesting they should be responsible for their own learning, and that the university, as one student noted, “believes we could (and should) manage to write on our own.” On the other, several students alluded to autonomy on a societal level, noting that Norwegians are used to working independently. As one student offered, “We as a people like to do things by ourselves.” Similarly, several students reasoned that the “Norwegian personality” – one that is often construed as impersonal and private – might hinder the notion of a writing center, with its personal, one-on-one sessions. Yet others asserted that their attitudes towards academic writing might pose a quandary, positing that students may be content with an average-quality paper. In essence, some students seemed to embrace an “anti-process” approach to writing, one that endorsed the completion of a paper more so than the process of its development. Further, students on occasion hinted at a power dynamic between themselves and their professors, noting that their instructors' feedback on their writing assignment sufficed; there was thus no need to consult an outside entity such as a writing center for additional feedback. As one student indicated, “It is the thought that the lecturers have all the answers. Instead of letting the students be able to discuss [their writing] with the lecturer, the student just receives written feedback.”

Another theme that emerged was students' lack of contact with their professors, alluding to the rarity of meeting their professors one-on-one. Specifically, on almost ten occasions, students mentioned that professors are more distant and unavailable, and do not hold office hours or offer to meet students outside of class. In short, students rarely have close relations with professors. This lack of access, whether as a concerted effort on the part of professors or simply a falling in line with Norwegian academic tradition, placed the students in the position of determining on their own how best to improve their academic writing. While students stated that they on occasion consulted professors in class or via email, most were, if not self-sufficient, unlikely to turn to their professors; instead, they relied on online resources or turned to fellow colleagues.

Differing conceptions of a writing center

When asked how a writing center might get off the ground, the most prominent conception expressed by students that diverges from established conceptions was that visits to the writing center should be obligatory. Roughly half of the students (21 of 43 total), in fact, suggested that obligatory visits would help them habituate to the sessions, and the benefits derived from those sessions. In turn, students would come to see the value of visiting the writing center, which would help to increase demand. As one student noted, “Kinda like what you’re doing. Have it mandatory in the beginning – then people will eventually find it very helpful and would do it voluntary.”

As mentioned previously, students contended that they have minimal contact with their professors outside of class, a relative norm in Norwegian academic culture. This finding also plays into their conceptions of a writing center, as students seemed to think that writing centers are necessarily run (and sessions administered) by a professor. In other words, because students are at odds with the notion of developing relations with a professor more than necessary, a consequent side effect might be hesitation to seek help with academic writing at a writing center run by a professor or faculty. Although I informed students initially that writing center tutors in the US tend to be students¹, they understandably saw the writing center – at least in its embryonic stages – as a one-person, faculty-run institution.

This finding also ties into students’ self-professed general lack of knowledge of what a writing center embodies. As one student stressed, “I don’t understand why you keep referring to it as a ‘writing center’ when it is just your office next to many other offices.” While this response alluded more to the visual components of a writing center, several students hinted at conceptual ones. For instance, the writing center was deemed a “foreign concept” in several surveys, one that the students neither know nor talk about.

A final response from the students that merits discussion is the manner in which several professors and lecturers in my department have designed their syllabi. Specifically, it has become common for a syllabus to include an interim deadline for a required assignment in which students submit a draft of a paper or project to their professor for review. In fact, the requirement for my students to visit the writing center at least one time to procure feedback

¹ While European writing centers are increasingly being staffed by peer tutors, most still employ professional faculty and staff (Santa, 2009).

on their assignments was embedded in my course syllabus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, numerous students mentioned in their surveys that formal writing center visits should be required in the future for assignment drafts in other courses.

On the one hand, these differing conceptions of the constitution of a writing center may have stemmed on my part from an improper or inadequate introduction of what a writing center is; many of these conceptions – such as building a writing center visit into a syllabus – are not common practice in US writing centers. On the other hand, these differing conceptions, particularly because they derived from a survey question that asked students how they feel a writing center might be established, deserve greater scrutiny, as they have the potential to play a critical role in whether students return.

5. DISCUSSION

Although the findings of this study align with many of the challenges chronicled by writing center scholarship, they are noteworthy because they are based on perspectives constructed by students, and consequently spurn some of the long-established writing center best practices. To this end, the discussion points here are overwhelmingly geared towards respect for the local writing context.

As noted, numerous students seemed at a loss as to the purpose and logistics of a writing center. This discovery mirrors the findings of studies that have examined the obstacles of establishing writing centers in other European countries (Reichert, et al., 2013) and elsewhere around the world (Garcia-Arroyo & Quintana, 2012). Yet the maxim of “no need to reinvent the wheel” is apropos. For instance, the praise for the dialogic and oral interactions that derived from students’ sessions highlights ties to previous studies’ findings of dialogic interactions (Bakhtin, 1994) aiding a writer’s increased awareness of audience and a reduction of acts of appropriation on the part of the tutor (Merkel, 2018). Similarly, facets of a process approach to writing (e.g., organization, strength of argument) align with the need for higher-order concerns to play a prominent role in writing center sessions (Moussu, 2013). While not all of the survey responses coordinated with extant scholarship, the ones that did show the promise of common ground. In this sense, while it is vital for local context to play a pivotal role in the founding of a writing center, it is equally important to determine which local

writing practices are already calibrated with long-established pedagogical writing approaches and philosophies in other contexts.

Indubitably, the most important issue pertains to students' suggestion for writing center sessions to be mandatory. Based on the fact that the appointments garnered praise from most students, it is not surprising that students alleged they would visit the writing center again. However, the notion of making the sessions required runs counter to one of the more conventional philosophies of a writing center, namely that a student's choice illustrates a personal decision to invest time and energy into their work; the notion of visits as voluntary is endorsed by writing center tutors and staff, as students tend to be more motivated when the visits are not required (Salem, 2016). As Salem (2016) notes, the idea of choice "posits the individual student as a free agent who lives in society, but thinks and acts independently from it" (p. 153). Yet the notion of visiting a writing center – even under the auspices of choice – arguably still relies on acts of dependence, as the visit signals a student's reliance on another entity. Salem (2016) concedes this as much, noting that a student's visit can be instigated by a required assignment, which thus renders the visit not entirely "free."

Findings have shown that students may react negatively to obligatory visits (Bell & Stutts, 1997). In this sense, logic would dictate that Norwegian students would prefer writing center visits to be voluntary, as an obligatory visit would conceivably run counter to the cultural expectation of self-sufficiency and autonomy of the Norwegian student. As Dysthe (2002) notes, Norwegian students are free to pursue the knowledge required for their courses however they choose. In Germany, a country with a similar education system to Norway's, undergraduate writing is characterized by a great degree of autonomy and the dual concepts of *Einsamkeit* and *Freiheit* (solitude and freedom) (Foster, 2002; Santa, 2009). The students in this study who reckoned that they should complete their work on their own also seem to subscribe to these concepts.

However, students' belief in and desire for academic autonomy must be juxtaposed against the reality that their writing skills may not yet be up to snuff. In recent years, Norwegian higher education has been veering towards a more collaborative approach to education, one which attempts to address the knowledge gap between upper secondary school students and university students (Lødding & Aamodt, 2015). To this end, several parallels can be found between students' requests for obligatory visits and the academic trajectories that

recent Norwegian scholarship on academic writing endorses. For instance, one facet of a writing workshop touted by Engdal (2012) is the role of dialogic interaction, an attribute of writing center sessions that several of the students in this study appreciated. Obligatory appointments also have the potential to address the lack of training of students' academic writing development (Hambro, et al., 2019) and simultaneously enable instructors to continue to focus on content and other discipline-specific matters (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2017). And while obligatory visits are not the norm, several studies have revealed positive results of requiring students to visit the writing center. Often a curriculum-based requirement (Rendelman, 2013), these visits have the potential to result in higher assignment or course grades and an increase in writers' confidence (Babcock & Thonus, 2012), as well as an increased likelihood that students will return to the writing center (Gordon, 2008). Yet the most relevant and distinct difference between the aforementioned studies and this study is that in the former, the obligation was driven by professors or writing center staff, whereas in this study the obligation was proposed by the students themselves. In sum, adopting local writing practices may require a few tenets of traditional writing center philosophy to be broken.

6. CONCLUSION

Situated within the context of Norwegian higher education, the purpose of this study was to examine the challenges an individual might face in establishing a university writing center when that individual is not a native, linguistically or culturally, to the context. Findings revealed that a balance should be found between determining what writing center best practices might transition seamlessly to the new context versus those that might need to be modified or reinvented.

A first logical step in establishing a writing center in a foreign context, then, might be to determine what writing center best practices could transfer to the next context. As commonalities, these best practices would prevent having to reinvent the wheel; further, these practices could serve as cornerstones of the writing center. By extension, a second step would be to determine what best practices would need to be reconfigured or altogether discarded in order for the writing center to adopt to the local academic culture, even if these modifications go against the grain of long-established writing center best practices. By procuring student feedback, one can rely on the students themselves to play an integral, agentive role in the

writing center “commandments,” such as determining whether the writing center should be staffed by instructors or their peers, or whether a directive or non-directive model is adopted during the tutoring sessions (Turner, 2006).

Lyon (2009) notes that overseas instructors “should not claim ownership of a writing pedagogy, but see it as a shared enterprise with their students” and that to truly engage with local pedagogies “requires risking their own foundations” (p. 234). Risking one’s own foundations – or at least achieving a balancing between one’s own foundations and those of a new community – thus has the potential to pave the way towards establishing the trust required to successfully launch a writing center.

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