

Article

## “Dedicated Drop-ins” as a Way of Addressing Some Writing Centre Challenges

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### **Abstract**

Writing centres need to be integrated into the writing community of their host institutions, but this can be difficult: often students view them as peripheral (Bowles 2019), see them as “fix-it” shops and/or see them as places where one simply “learns to write” (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015; Simpson 2010), or do not perceive a connection between their services and students’ actual, current course work (Missakian, Olson, Black & Matuchniak, 2016). In this article I discuss the practice of offering and running “dedicated drop-ins,” course- and assignment-specific drop-in sessions for writing support, as one means of addressing several of the challenges that writing centres face in terms of making themselves visible and visibly useful members of their institutional community. Our experience shows that while these “dedicated drop-ins” are not in themselves a perfect solution, they can be a useful addition to writing centres’ toolkits.

**Keywords:** Drop-ins; writing centres; writing community; academic support

## Some Writing Centre Challenges

Among the many challenges that writing centres face, there are five related ones that I would like to begin by mentioning: making students aware of us; ensuring that they see us as relevant to their actual work; ensuring that our support is linked to their current assignments; ensuring that we provide support that will make them more effective in their current writing tasks; and raising our profile among faculty. Addressing these challenges involves making writing centres both *visible* and *visibly useful* within the writing community of our host institutions.

The first challenge is to make students aware of us. Students are often unaware that we exist; even when that is not the case, writing centres can be seen as peripheral or hidden away (a perception that our sometimes secluded locations can help foster)—in other words, they can be seen as an extra or a bonus but not really part of the core university experience. Bowles, for instance, discusses how when they publicize the writing centre to students at Texas A&M University, they first need to let them know what it is (Bowles 2019); Cheatle and Bullerjahn note that “the takeaway from the surveys [that they distributed] is that many native English-speaking students in our study perceived our Writing Center as a place for first-year students and international students, not for native English-speaking students who are in upper-level classes” (2015, p. 23). As Simpson puts it, “students perceive the writing center as sanctuary, as dust bin, as fix-it shop, as all kinds of things” (Simpson 2010, p. 1). Thus, the first challenge involves making sure that students know about us, and that what they know is accurate.

This lack of knowledge, or inaccurate knowledge, can be compounded by lack of awareness of the sorts, or range, of services that writing centres typically offer; this leads into the second challenge, which is to convince students that writing centres are authentically relevant to students’ actual, current work, as noted in the citation from Cheatle and Bullerjahn above. In their discussion of their initial encounter with the writing centre at the University of Central Arkansas, Madison Sewell points out that “prior to my own appointment, I had a slew of misconceptions about the center, and I know that many others still hold the same misconceptions” (Sewell 2016, p. 28). In conversation with students and even with instructors, I have often encountered the idea that writing centres are “places that you go to just generally learn to write,” to quote from a discussion I had with a student (I am not sure what it means to learn to write “generally” either, but that’s a different question ...). Few students want to “just generally learn to write,” even if (in a post-process world) it were possible to teach that;

students want help with their current, specific writing endeavours, and in my experience are often unaware of the range of services that we offer that provide such support, including feedback on specific higher-order issues, help with understanding assignment descriptions, and instruction with regard to reader expectations of academic genres.

The third challenge is to provide those students who do visit us with support that arises from insight into students' current assignments—Missakian et al. point out that students may perceive tutors as not knowing specific assignment expectations (2016, p. 69). Staff in writing centres will usually be quite familiar with many of the various genres of assignments that students are likely to bring in; they may have experience working with this course's assignments in previous years; and if the course is a big one, or one in which students are encouraged to visit the writing centre, they may well see the assignment any number of times in a given term. But particularly in the early part of the term, they may not be familiar with the assignment, and they might not have had access to guidance from the course instructor, identifying what aspects of the assignment she is particularly concerned with.

The fourth challenge for writing tutors is to provide support that helps students succeed in their current contexts, i.e. that takes the concerns of their instructors into full consideration. This one is on us, as tutors: We need to keep rhetorical considerations in mind in our assistance, just as we urge students to keep them in mind in their writing. Our main job is to help students communicate effectively, and the efficacy of communication is always wrapped up with the expectations of the context in which the communication takes place; those expectations are, for instance, laid out in course learning objectives. In our capacities as writing centre staff, we do not design courses or programs, and so we do not know the appropriate learning objectives for these students in this course as well as the instructors do.

For all these reasons, as well as basic respect for human autonomy, it is not our job to lead students into thinking *our way*: it is our job to support them as they figure out how they want to think in order to achieve their goals and to help them express that thinking effectively. Almost always, that means writing tutors must support students in learning the course work that their instructors and departments have set up. As Missakian et al. put it, "because both instructors and students may be more interested in the final product and final grade, they may not acknowledge, understand, or value the process as tutors do. Tutors may focus on the writing process as a way of helping *writers* rather than

their writing, while students and instructors value the finished writing artifact more” (Missakian et al. 2016, p. 66). Whether or not we agree with this evaluation that ranks product over process, we must acknowledge that it often exists, and that we do have some responsibility to support students in what directly concerns them. Knowing the instructor’s concerns is an invaluable aid for tutors in overcoming this challenge.

The fifth challenge, at least in the context of my university, is to increase awareness and use of us by course instructors. We need to encourage them to see us as helpful colleagues whose work is relevant to their work, and whose approach supports their goals. More broadly, our challenge is to convince them that we are part of their community, and to let them know what roles we can fulfil in that community; thus Miley urges “mapping ... institutional ethnography in order to be able to describe the writing centre’s role and to see how its work is “perceived by others” (Miley 2017, p. 105), while Powers stresses the importance of understanding and establishing the centre’s institutional context when planning collaboration with other organizations or individuals (Powers 2016). As Simpson puts it, “one professor imagines the writing center as an editing service. Another person perceives it as a place to ‘teach writing.’ ... Administrators may see it as part of retention programs or as an element of their CYA [cover your ass] strategies. Sometimes the perceptions are pieced together from the semantics of the phrase ‘writing center.’ Sometimes they represent analogous thinking, a belief that the writing center is like a carwash with detailing service” (Simpson 2010, p. 1). In any of these cases, we suffer when course instructors do not see us as useful partners.

## **Dedicated Drop-Ins (DDIs)**

One particular way that the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre (hereafter RGASC) at the University of Toronto’s Mississauga campus has tried to address the five identified challenges is by setting up “dedicated drop-ins” (hereafter DDIs); these are course- and assignment-specific drop-in times for writing support (the RGASC also offers other forms of support, but the DDIs all concern writing issues). The process is as follows:

- 1) In July/August and November/December we reach out to instructors of undergraduate courses on campus offering support, including the possibility of DDIs. The instructors we reach out to are ones with whom we have worked in the previous year; ones teaching courses where students have shown an interest in our services; and/or instructors who are referred

to us or who contact us.

- 2) For instructors interested in setting DDIs up, we do our best to ensure that the DDIs and the RGASC's information are in the syllabus, and that we are given an opportunity in an early class to briefly address the students, introducing the RGASC and publicizing the DDIs.
- 3) We encourage instructors to promote the DDIs in the weeks leading up to them, and a week before the DDIs we reach out to instructors to get the final version of the assignment description, course outline and rubrics and any other relevant material, and their particular concerns.
- 4) We usually set up two DDIs, which are each typically 2-3 hours. One DDI is offered in the morning and one in the afternoon; this is to ensure we reach as many students as possible. We offer the sessions before or after lectures and tutorials to avoid schedule conflicts. The first of the two sessions is usually booked a week in advance of the assignment deadline, and the second is three days before the deadline.
- 5) In terms of the structure of the sessions, the DDIs usually involve short (ca. 10 minute) one-to-one meetings with students to address questions specifically related to the assignment. Questions may include, "Am I on the right track?", "Am I doing everything the assignment asks for?", and/or "How can I tell if I'm doing this right?" Students with more detailed concerns, or concerns that are not specifically tied to the assignment, are encouraged to book appointments at the RGASC or take advantage of its other services, as are students seeking follow-up after the DDI. In some cases, I may meet with more than one student at a time; if there are many students there with overlapping questions, we may run the DDI as a group session.
- 6) In terms of staffing, often I am the only one working the DDI. If we anticipate heavy turnout, we will try to have other RGASC staff available and prepped; sometimes, especially with early year science courses, I will work with one or more course Teaching Assistants (TAs)—I will address/help the students with specifically writing-focused concerns, while the TAs teach content.
- 7) DDI are always held on campus, but in previous years many of them had to be held outside of the RGASC due to capacity issues, which interfered with our goal of familiarizing students with the space. We have recently moved to a larger space on campus, however, and now we

can accommodate more students at our drop-ins; up to 20 can be accommodated in the room in which we work, and there is room for another 20 to wait outside.

We had been offering DDIs before my arrival at the RGASC, but over the past five years I have significantly expanded our offerings. In 2018/2019, we ran them for 32 courses from across the disciplinary spectrum.

## **Benefits**

There are a number of benefits to running DDIs at our institution, particularly when we keep in mind the challenges discussed above about making writing centres both visible, and visibly useful, in the campus ecosystem.

First, DDIs give our ASC an opportunity to support students. In the 2018-2019 academic year, total attendance at the drop-ins was 300; while there were some duplications, I would estimate that we interacted with at least 270 students altogether, many of whom didn't know about us previously. DDIs held in the fall term were overwhelmingly more successful than those held in the winter; similarly, DDIs for courses with engaged instructors did well. Our advice to those thinking of trying them would thus be a) be sure to get the instructor onboard and b) think twice before booking winter ones, at least insofar as attendance at the actual DDI is concerned: there may well be other good reasons for holding winter DDIs, such as forging connections with instructors or publicizing your writing centre. We feel quite strongly that DDIs do not have to be packed to be worth doing, and we advise you always to have extra work on hand just in case things are slow.

This support is valuable in and of itself, but we are also interested in the degree to which offering DDIs can lead students to increase their use of our services throughout the year. We hope in the next year to do a major investigation of attendance data, cross-referencing it with regular appointment records, in order to determine the degree to which drop-ins can serve as a way to start a relationship with the RGASC. Our current information, drawn from DDIs offered in two second year social sciences courses, is mixed.

Our preliminary analysis of one second year social sciences course from winter 2016 suggests that the drop-ins did not do that. In total, 20 students came to one or the other of the two 2-hour DDI sessions, of whom 2 had used our services before. One of those two also used our services in fall 2016,

as did one of the students who had never made use of our services before. So we helped out 17 students who had never used us before and never did again; we continued a relationship with two students; and we began a relationship with one student.

There is a different and more cheerful story to tell for a different second year social sciences course and its fall 2017 DDI. In total, 24 students attended one of the two 2-hour DDI sessions; 13 of the 24 had never used us before. 7 of these 13 booked appointments after the drop-ins: 4 of those 7 booked in the winter term of 2017/2018, but not in 2018/2019, while the other 3 booked in 2018/2019 as well as 2017/2018. In this case, then, the DDI enabled us to develop an existing relationship with 11 students, or 46% of the attendees; to begin a multi-year relationship with 3 students, or 13% of the attendees; to begin a one-year relationship with 4 students, or 17% of the attendees; and to offer at least this one service to 6 students, or 25% of the attendees.

In looking at this information, there are two important caveats to keep in mind. First of all, most of the DDIs, and definitely the best-attended ones, are for first year courses, where we naturally are not able to determine student usage before the drop-in. Secondly, from a glass-half-full perspective, students who attended DDIs but then didn't go on to use our services at least got some support from us in the DDI; if these are students who were unlikely to ever use us, at least the drop-ins got them in the door once, which is better than nothing.

A second benefit has to do with letting students know about the RGASC: whether or not students can make it for the actual DDI, the fact that they are offered and promoted raises awareness of us, and identifies us as being concerned with specific assignments; thus it is not uncommon for me to get emails from students around the time of the DDI or shortly afterwards, saying that they couldn't for whatever reason attend the DDI, but that they would like to book a regular appointment at the RGASC instead. Although we cannot (yet) quantify this, the RGASC's Centre Coordinator and I both feel very strongly, based on anecdotal evidence, that we see increased numbers of students from these courses in the weeks around the drop-ins.

A third benefit is that this process enhances our knowledge of the range of assignments, as well as particular instructor concerns. This is useful for work with any specific assignment, and it also keeps us up to date on what's happening on campus generally; furthermore, such knowledge helps to expand my grasp of writing assignments across a range of disciplines.

Plans for DDIs are also not infrequently combined with the opportunity to work with instructors on assignment or rubric design, which leads into the fourth benefit that I want to mention, namely that they help to establish the RGASC as partners with course instructors in a writing community. Regardless of eventual attendance, instructors appreciate being approached about DDIs and are usually happy to set them up. Organizing DDIs can be the start of a relationship with an instructor, or it can be an opportunity to deepen an already existent relationship; either way, the writing community is strengthened.

## Conclusion

One of our fundamental justifications for DDIs is that they can serve as a way for us to begin a relationship with students who might not otherwise come to see us, or indeed even be aware of what we have to offer them. Our preliminary research indicates that this is not happening to the degree that we would like, at least not yet. Nonetheless, given the limitations of our investigations and the other benefits of DDIs that I have laid out, we consider them to be valuable and worth continuing; they are one way that we establish UTM as a writing community, and ourselves as useful members of that community.

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