SUPPORTING BUSINESS STUDENTS IN THE WRITING CENTER

Ashlyn Bellman and Marilyn Damord | York College of Pennsylvania

This project builds on Armand St. Pierre's 2017 study of how writing tutors can assist engineering students without fully comprehending the technical language. We first explore how the writing center can help students in business by synthesizing previous research, exploring the debate of specialized and generalized tutoring in writing centers, business writing requirements, and how the writing center can support business writers. Then we analyze interviews conducted with two business professors to help tutors gain insight into business students' requirements. Understanding the key features of business writing will better prepare tutors to help students with their specific genres.

In higher education, the writing center is at the heart of bettering student literacy in and outside of the classroom. Writing centers are most commonly found and implemented within educational institutions. They are dedicated to creating a satisfactory experience for all students who come to the center, physically or virtually, seeking feedback on their work. Whether visits to the writing center are required for an academic grade or simply for intrinsic purposes, the mission of the writing center has changed very little since its rise in the 20th century. Yet, it has become increasingly evident through observable patterns that the field/discipline of a student's study can create an invisible barrier between the student and the help needed for them to grow—even if the limitation is not intentional. In his 2018 *Young Scholars in Writing* article "Embracing the Other Culture: Bridging the Gap Between Writing Center and Engineering Studies," Armand St. Pierre, an engineering student and peer tutor at Hofstra University, seeks to bridge the gap between writing tutors and engineering students by investigating the types of variables that hinder these students (and students of related disciplines) from taking advantage of the writing center's many resources. St. Pierre presents ways that writing tutors, particularly those not from a STEM background, could support engineering students. Through our research about tutoring approaches, we wanted to know if St. Pierre's findings would apply to another discipline. With this focus, we conducted interviews with business faculty using St. Pierre's interview questions.

St. Pierre discusses the importance of distinguishing between different disciplines (or "cultures," as he describes them), as this explains students' negative dispositions towards

writing assignments involving a genre outside of their fields of study and their comfort zones. The notion is that the anxiety only goes as far as the unfamiliarity of subject matter; however, in the writing center, the deeper root of the problem is not just "a fear of navigating… [the] 'language'" of a discipline unfamiliar to one's own (ex. engineers becoming unnerved by lengthy paragraphs on humanist subjects), but a "lack of mutual understanding" between tutor and student (St. Pierre 58). In essence, when people think "writing center," they think "humanities." According to popular perception, the culture surrounding writing tutors is devoid of numbers or any quantitative knowledge, making writing centers virtually inaccessible for engineering and science students. In order to erase this stigma from the writing center, St. Pierre calls for a change of mindset and action, encouraging students to think of the writing center less as a site for the linguistically inclined and more as a laboratory where tutors and students alike can improve in *both* "humanistic and scientific literacy" (58).

However, we know that, as the writing center is meant to aid all disciplines, other disciplinary contexts also demand the attention of writing tutors—namely, business writing. Business writing assumes various forms, like writing in other fields; it is specific to its discipline and thus may require a more meticulous eye according to the standards and guidelines that define its being. Business papers are *meant* to be direct and straightforward (especially when they see a transition into the professional world), and tutors have the ability to accommodate students' business writing. In some ways, business writing does not stray far from the ways of engineering writing, at least in the sense that they both deal much more with numbers and quantitative data (every humanities student's fear, in St. Pierre's eyes)—but does the writing center currently accommodate all of these needs? After all, business and science entertain a growing relationship, and the uses of business writing in the professional world extend to multiple playing fields, all of which require writers to have a sufficient understanding of such literacy. With this in mind, we wondered if St. Pierre's conclusions about how writing tutors can best support engineering students would also pertain to business, a discipline that St. Pierre has not yet explored.

GENERALIST OR SPECIALIST APPROACHES TO TUTORING

St. Pierre's article explores both the generalist and specialist tutoring process, ultimately vouching for the benefits of generalist tutors. However, generalist tutors have also been referred to as "ignorant tutors" (Hubbuch) because of their basic level of knowledge in a variety of areas that makes itself known in any foundational tutoring session. Common issues that generalist tutors address include mechanics and grammar, sentence structure, and other local calls for revision that any student can understand and benefit from, regardless of discipline. Since writing is so complex in nature, it can become challenging when a generalist tutor is faced with a paper of unfamiliar subject matter, making the tutor uncertain about how to provide feedback to the tutee.

Despite this, Susan Hubbuch deems generalist tutoring advantageous in its pullback from the knowledge of the specific field (especially when unfamiliar to the tutor) and its aim to simply understand the student's original ideas and arguments (27). Drawing on the work of Hubbuch, whom many scholars have pointed to for her take on generalist tutoring, Kristen Walker explains that the generalist tutor's main knowledge gaps can nonetheless be a virtue, as "the tutor cannot prematurely suggest ways to revise the paper, based on his/her experience in the field" (27-28). Thus, "the ignorant tutor… is just as likely—perhaps even more likely— than the expert to help the student recognize what must be stated in the text" (Hubbuch 28). Since generalist tutors are not as knowledgeable in the subject area as the student, the student becomes the teacher, in a sense—the client is forced "to articulate discipline-specific knowledge" (Walker 28), demonstrating (and deepening) their knowledge of the material as a result and realizing what more is left to build upon.

Specialist tutors, on the other hand, possess deeper knowledge in a given subject area (according to a tutee's needs) but less knowledge in other topics or knowledge in fewer topics outside of their specialization. This increased knowledge can be seen as an advantage that generalist tutors lack more often than not, as specialist tutors can more effectively work with the global issues within a tutee's paper (purpose, analysis, organization, etc.). Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington investigate the disciplines of history and political science. Through examination of tapes and transcripts of tutoring sessions, they find specialist tutors promoting more productivity within these sessions than generalist tutors, as the specialists' understanding of specific subjects "allows them to be more directive in ways that enhance collaboration" (74). Tutors being more direct with a student, offering a "pushback to the student's point of view" (81), could be seen as taking power from the student's hands, yet Dinitz and Harrington suggest that this approach to tutoring did not hinder writing improvement in their writing center. Although specialist tutors generally do not have the same range as generalist tutors, studies such as those conducted by Dinitz and Harrington imply a need for more specialists who challenge students to think critically within their discipline to obtain the keys to writing success.

St. Pierre finds generalist tutors more useful for STEM disciplines. As an engineering student, St. Pierre notes how his experiences working in the writing center bettered both his writing and his ability to help all types of students improve their overall writing skills. Between specialist and generalist tutors, St. Pierre favors generalist tutors for their ability to focus on a paper's local issues, which makes them capable of assisting tutees of any academic background. While it is an asset for tutors to be able to participate in discipline-specific conversations with students, specialist tutors do not often have the same experience in a writing center session as generalist tutors due to differences in skill set. St. Pierre's study makes important observations on the writing center for engineering writing, but does his view also hold true for business writing?

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS WRITING

Business writing serves the purpose of efficiently communicating with colleagues in a workplace setting. College students who study business predominantly encounter business writing genres as their professors attempt to make students ready for their professions after graduation. In order to help writing center directors prepare tutors for a better understanding of business and technical writing, Bertie Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow explore the skills required for business literacy. The authors highlight the importance of using clear and straightforward language that is strategically organized to assist the reader in quick comprehension. They state, "Busy readers expect the main points to be in the most prominent position: the beginning" (Fearing and Sparrow 221). Business writing is used to swiftly convey professional information, so placing important points first is essential for an audience who does not have much time to spend reading. Ron Scheer further illustrates the value of promptness when it comes to business writing: "business writing is self-consciously addressed not to the intellectually curious but to decision makers. It values brevity and clarity over expansiveness and ambiguity. While it may at times educate and inform, its main goal is to get things done" (1). Simplicity and conciseness are defining terms when it comes to business writing, as they allow readers to process information quickly.

Academic writing differs from business writing in regard to formatting. Spanish business professor Félix Vásquez argues that students, especially Spanish-speaking students, should be explicitly taught the differences in format between business and academic writing: "Business writing encompasses different *genres*: e-mails, memos, letters, work orders, contracts, company brochures, sales materials, manuals, proposals, presentations, reports, and business and marketing plans" (100). Elizabeth Tomlinson, who conducted research by performing interviews with business and economics professors about writing, observes, "As faculty discussed goals for their students, they referenced particular genres their students would write, so we developed genre-specific resources, such as tips for writing an executive summary, approaches to constructing a business plan, and pointers for presentation design" (9). Business writing comes in various formats that may not be appropriate in academic writing, which often takes the form of dissertations, abstracts, essays, and scholarly articles.

Another distinction between business and academic writing is the expected level of complexity. Vásquez notes that a key difference between business and academic writing is that business writing is easy to read, to the point, and concise (99). Conversely, academic writing can be seen as more intricate. Scheer writes, "The practices of standard business writing don't apply across the board. One exception is a kind of academic writing that is highly theoretical, analytical, and speculative—in other words, deliberately difficult" (3). Business writing tends to be very simple and direct, whereas academic writing is complex and methodical.

SUPPORTING BUSINESS WRITING IN THE WRITING CENTER

The writing center can assist business students in enhancing their writing skills by providing a reliable location to review their work and obtain suggestions. Business researchers Cam Caldwell and Noof Jasim Hamdan Al-Ajm view the writing center as "a powerful tool to help students develop writing skills that enable them to communicate simply, clearly, and powerfully" (38). This position highlights the capabilities of the writing center to help business students improve their written assignments. Tomlinson also finds that business and economics faculty perceive the writing centers to be a beneficial place for students to read their papers aloud (8). Reading written assignments aloud allows students to comprehend their writing differently and find mistakes that would otherwise be overlooked. Likewise, Scheer also promotes the collaborative aspects of the writing center, stating that "The consultants at the writing center give students an experience of collaborative writing. By being interested and knowledgeable readers with feedback, they help reinforce an important lesson about written communication—a second opinion is better than just one's own" (4). The work of these scholars on the ways writing centers can support business students seem to align with St. Pierre's conclusion that generalist tutors can support disciplinary writers. However, we wanted to hear from business faculty to get their perspective.

INTERVIEWING METHODS

We decided to repeat St. Pierre's study by interviewing two business professors at our institution. We will refer to them as Professor A and Professor B. Professor A is a white male who has specialized in entrepreneurship and innovation courses for over 20 years. Professor B is also a white male who primarily instructs business management lectures. We asked both professors questions about their own writing and the writing they expect from students. All of the questions asked were identical to the questions St. Pierre asked during his research. We conducted the interviews virtually and recorded them via Zoom, and then we transcribed the recordings using an online transcribing software. Finally, we compared the two interviews using *analytic coding,* a system used to conduct qualitative research by labeling and categorizing transcripts. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into writing within the business field, which will help us fully understand what business professors are looking for in their students' writing and how the writing center can best adapt its practices to accommodate these students. The interviews also allow us to explore whether peer tutors should take a generalized or specialized approach to tutoring in the writing center.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

During their interviews, both professors gave similar answers about the characteristics of

business writing and the need for collaboration. While comparing the interviews, we found key themes both professors mentioned about business writing: audience, formatting, and teamwork. There were a few questions where the professors' answers differed; this came about in the questions regarding students' strengths and weaknesses, as well as the use of the writing center. We will go further in-depth about the professor's responses as we summarize and analyze their answers in the next paragraphs as we also relate and compare our findings to St. Pierre's study.

The first question we asked the professors was about the characteristics of writing in the business field. Both professors agree that who their audience is, helps them to decide how to format their writing. Formatting is an important aspect of writing in business. Professor A brings up the necessity of writing memos, or brief messages written to be understood quickly by a specific audience. He explains that memos are used by any stakeholder in a business: "For example, a manager may write a memo to a different department, a boss could write a memo to give to their employees, or an investor could write a memo to the CEO." When writing a memo, it is important to be clear and concise. Professor A continues, "We all work in organizations which have writing rules and contexts for writing. I want to teach students to be adaptable to any form of writing they may encounter." Business students are given assignments that allow them to familiarize themselves with various formats of writing that are common in any workplace setting.

St. Pierre also finds that formatting is important for engineering students, as they are prompted to follow specific formats for research and presentations (63). One purpose of STEM writing is to simplify complex topics so a much wider audience can comprehend the ideas. Engineers rely on mathematics to justify what they are asserting in their writing. However, St. Pierre notes that equations and formulas should only be used as evidence to validate their stance. Engineering students must create a clear argument based on the supporting data. St. Pierre's findings were similar to ours: both disciplines utilize specific formats that value clarity and simplicity and should not include unexplained or overly complicated quantitative data.

Next, we asked the professors about the need for collaboration in a business setting. They both agree on the importance of having different perspectives working together to accomplish a goal. By problem-solving with others, there are more people to share their ideas. The more ideas there are, the quicker a solution can be found. In addition, Professor B highly suggests the use of collaborative writing, stating, "Collaboration helps to write a better paper, and it also allows writers to grow. I always have somebody read what I write. They normally point things out to me that gives me a different perspective." One person cannot always be well-versed in every subject they may be writing about; by having multiple people working on a paper, more information will be included. Collaboration is also necessary because more people can add different ideas and skill sets. Professor A also brings

up that many hiring managers are looking for employees with soft skills like collaboration and teamwork. For business professionals, it is more than necessary to know how to work in groups. Additionally, St. Pierre finds that collaboration is of equal importance to engineers as they must share their research with audiences who may not have the same specialized knowledge (62). By collaborating with others, engineering students can make their writing understandable to a wider audience.

We inquired about the advantages of writing in business as well. Professor A states, "I use memos to take notes of what was said in conversations in order to be sure there were no misunderstandings." He also practices this in his academic career by taking note of what was mentioned in sessions with his students. Keeping a written record offers the professor a defense in case a student was to misinterpret what was agreed upon in the meeting. This practice is common in business settings to protect companies from being held legally responsible for misunderstandings. Contracts are legally binding agreements involving one or more parties, making them another important genre of business writing. Similar to memos, contracts must be clear and concise so both parties can understand them. There are many similarities between business writing and engineering writing, but the legal aspect distinguishes the two.

In addition to asking questions about business writing, we also discovered more about what the professors are looking for in their students' work. Each professor has different perspectives on what they consider strengths and weaknesses. Professor A considers a strong student's work free of grammatical and spelling errors. He specifically mentions weaknesses in student writing, such as misusing jargon, forgetting to use commas when listing, and starting with prepositions (and, but, or, because). Professor A focuses more on local revisions, whereas Professor B cares more about global revisions. Professor B mentions that strong papers deliver on the concept and contain a persuasive argument. Similarly, the engineer St. Pierre interviews also recalls the significance of having a convincing argument that is supported by plausible evidence.

Lastly, we spoke to the professors about the writing center. The subject of St. Pierre's interview views the generalist tutoring approach as constructive and essential for STEM students. The interviewee states, "in the context of a writing center session, [it] would mean that discussing a scientific concept in more general terms would not just be helpful for the tutor, but may also be necessary for the writer" (St. Pierre 62). Since the goal of STEM writing is to explain complex concepts to a general audience, tutors can help these students by not being specialized and offering an external view on the topic, which will ensure the writing is understandable. Our interviewees have somewhat differing opinions concerning the writing center, yet both professors find peer review to help students significantly. Professor B does not require his students to go to the writing center: "I don't require it because I want students to view the process as something that's from their own initiative. By keeping it voluntary, the student will be more invested." Though he does not require writing center visits, he

does suggest that students find a friend to review their papers and offer feedback. Professor A also does not require students to go to the writing center, but he requires them to do peer reviews instead.

CONCLUSION

The feedback from our interviewees indicates the importance of both generalist and specialist approaches to tutoring in the writing center. One professor we questioned seems to prefer specialist peer tutors and explains that they are helpful resources for students to ensure they comprehend the concepts covered in the class. The other professor agrees more with St. Pierre that a generalist tutor's vast knowledge helps to promote strong writing—and, simultaneously, strong writers. With this knowledge, undergraduate peer tutors can work to make the writing center a place that can effectively help business students, like other students.

Undergraduate research plays an essential role in understanding how writing center tutors can assist tutees. Undergraduate peer tutors are directly involved with students, allowing them to have a different perspective on the best way to help an individual. St. Pierre, an undergraduate researcher, advocates for the growth of students (both in writing and in their own knowledge of their course material), commenting in his article that the baseline of this improvement within the writing center comes when writing tutors "cultivate discussion with all departments, including and perhaps especially those in the sciences" (62). Our study mainly concerns the business discipline; inspired by his findings, we set out to discover how his idea of the ideal writing center related to a field of study that, though not discussed in his article, is of great importance both in the academic and business world. Both business professors in our study express what is important to them when evaluating their students' papers, and their interviews emphasize the significance of having a group of writing tutors that can collaborate with students to treat both local and global revisions within the writing. For business students, this means putting in the hard work to see success—both within and outside of their discipline—*and* having full access to a writing center system that will support them in their efforts. Writing tutors are a significant part of this endeavor, as the power of peer review should be one that all students reap from.

The writing center helps prepare business students to thrive in their classes—and prepare for post-graduate life—by ensuring that these students gain/develop the skills needed to write effectively. Not only are business students given general help from tutors with knowledge in various subject areas, but the students also experience the attention given to their less general subject area in a business writing center. Both tutoring styles, we have realized, are crucial in encouraging students in this discipline to flourish.

In order to best support business students, tutors have a part to play in making the college writing center an increasingly welcoming resource for students. The main ways tutors can maximize successful tutoring sessions with business students are by working *with* the students to confront any revisions and being

open to student questions. Even if these questions are discipline-specific, there are always learning opportunities in these crossroads for both tutor and student. Other tactics worth implementing for tutors could include practicing using diverse formatting, offering constructive feedback about the tutors ability to comprehend the students' writing, and understanding what the professor is asking the student for. Most importantly, tutors can keep a more careful eye on the culture that emerges from catering to each student's strengths and weaknesses. Both generalist and specialist tutors are at the forefront of producing the best possible writing center experiences by creating better writers. Since the goal of writing center directors is to recruit reliable tutors that will make the writing center a helpful resource for any learner, there is no room for opposition between different tutoring methods as they both effectively serve this purpose.

In the writing center, peer tutors assist in assuring that business students become well-prepared to face the demanding careers that wait for them in the labor force. For both tutors and students to reach an understanding of one another that St. Pierre describes, collaboration is of utmost importance for students to see an improvement in not just their writing but in their soft skills. We need *teamwork* in order for any change to occur. From this, both generalist and specialist tutors are equipped to accommodate business students as they embark on their journey into the professional world after graduation, assured that they are ready for what is to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WORKS CITED

Caldwell, Cam, and Noof Jasim Al-Ajmi. "Improving Business Student Writing–A Ten-Step Model." *Business and Management Research*, vol 7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 35–38, https://doi.org/10.5430/bmr.v7n1p35

Dinitz, Sue, and Susanmarie Harrington. "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 73–98, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43443372

Fearing, Bertie, and W. Keats Sparrow. "Tutoring Business and Technical Writing Students in the Writing Center." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, edited by Gary A. Olson, National Council of Teachers of English, 1984, pp. 215-26.

Hubbuch, Susan M. "A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: __Agree, __Disagree, __Not Sure." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1988, pp. 23–30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43441862

Scheer, Ron. "Taking Care of Business at the Writing Center." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 30, no. 1. Sept. 2005, pp.1–4.

St. Pierre, Armand. "Embracing the Other Culture: Bridging the Gap Between the Writing Center and Engineering Studies." *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 14, 2017, pp. 56–66, https://youngscholarsinwriting.org/index.php/ysiw/article/view/241

Tomlinson, Elizabeth. "Creating a Space for Business Communication" *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 39, no, 1–2, 2014, pp. 6–9.

Vásquez, Félix S. "Differences Between Academic and Business Writing." *Global Business Languages*, vol. 18, 2013, pp. 97–106, https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol18/iss1/8

Walker, Kristin. "The Debate over Generalist and Specialist Tutors: Genre Theory's Contribution." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1998, pp. 27–46, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43442046

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the defining features/characteristics of writing within your professional field?

2. What motivates your writing?

3. How important is the use of visual data in the presentation of your content?

4. Is collaboration common in your field?

5. Is collaboration recommended?

6. What are the advantages of writing within your field? What are the strengths of writing produced in your field?

7. What are some of the weaknesses of the writing produced in your field?

8. What, as an instructor, do you look for in a written assignment from your students?

9. What are some of the general strengths students in your field demonstrate in their writing?

10. What are their weaknesses?

11. What do you think the writing center [at your institution] can do to help students improve their writing?