Reflection on the Writing Center

By Danielle Vaughan, Co-editor

Working at the writing center has helped me gain not only professional skills, but also academic skills, and it has influenced my own writing for the better. Working at the writing center has improved my writing because it has allowed me to focus on the writing mistakes that I make. It has also influenced my view of what it means to be a “good” writer, changed the ways I approach writing, and given me better results on my writing assignments. These changes occurred once I began reflecting on the students I work with and their writing. I would like to share these realizations with other students, as they do not solely apply to my writing, but also to the writing process in general.

Many people try to reflect on and examine things they are too close to view critically by removing themselves from the situation. Working as a writing consultant allowed me to use this strategy to reflect on my own writing. Reading papers written by others has helped me to recognize the mistakes I make. For example, it is very easy for me to see subject-verb agreement errors in the papers I read; however, my own work often contained this same error. Seeing this mistake in the papers of other students has helped me recognize it in my own writing, and the number of subject-verb agreement errors that make it through my drafts has decreased significantly. Furthermore, I have become more aware of “awkward wording” in my papers. In the past, it was hard for me to understand why teachers or other students may have been confused by my wording. (I wrote it, so it made sense to me.) Now I am better able to recognize this kind of wording in my own drafts because I know how I would react if a student brought me a paper with the same wording.
I would recommend that all students do what I do in the writing center, which is to reflect critically on the work of others. When one is reading an article, a letter, or a chapter in a book, it is useful to ask, “Could this author be clearer? Is there a more productive way to say that?” Looking at the grammar mistakes of others will help students to be more conscious of the same mistakes in their own papers. Reflecting critically on the work of others can also help students become more aware of the nuances of writing and the writing concepts they may need to work on. In addition, many students mirror writing styles they see in books and other print sources they read, so it is important that they learn to think critically about these sources.

Working at the writing center has influenced what I think it means to be a “good” writer. Before working as a writing consultant, I believed that a good writer was someone who received high marks on her papers, someone whose work needed no help and no revision. Now that I have worked at the writing center for some time, I realize that a good writer is not a constant, but an evolving entity. Someone is not simply born a good writer; they do not come into this world being able to describe and analyze in perfect grammatical form. A good writer is someone who constantly changes, who constantly works towards being better. The students who have the best and most thorough papers are not those who come work with me in the writing center only once. They are the students who come in repeatedly for feedback on diverse papers.

Now that I know what makes students in the writing center successful, I have been able to recreate that success in my own writing by working to get the same feedback from others. Since I began working at the writing center, I have increased the frequency with which I ask peers to read my papers. For important papers or papers that I struggle with, I
often have more than one of my friends read the paper, which is what I recommend that they students I work with do. An author would not publish a work without first having a number of other people, including a publisher, editor, and an agent, read it, and students should treat their writing in the same way. A paper will be more successful if many eyes evaluate it.

Another way the writing center has helped me develop my writing is by showing me the strategies good writers use. When I began working at the writing center, I noticed that I expected students to use strategies I did not use myself. For example, I found myself requiring students to read their papers aloud, even though I did not do this. I felt disappointed when students did not take this advice seriously even though I did not take the advice seriously either. It was only when I started using this strategy myself that I felt able to convey its importance to students. I would say, “What helps me is reading it aloud. You notice stuff you won’t if you’re reading it in your head.” I always ask students to point out their thesis, or “point” as I usually call it, and then the parts of their paper that prove their point, something I find helps reduce unnecessary information and keep a paper on track. Once I began doing this with students, I truly appreciated the value of this strategy and used it in a majority of my papers before turning them in. It is necessary to use all the strategies one can when working on a paper, including finding the thesis and reading the paper aloud.

It is through these changes in my writing philosophy that my writing has developed immensely. Not only do I employ the strategies that I expect students to use in the writing center, but I am also more aware of the grammar and sentence mistakes I make in my own papers. As the famous librarian John Cotton Dana once said, “Who dares to teach must
never cease to learn.” If I expect students to learn from me, then I must also learn from them.