Non-traditional students in the writing center: Bridging the gap from a process-oriented world to a product-oriented one

Two and a half years ago, I returned to college after a twelve-year hiatus. I owned my own business, but the summer I turned thirty, I decided that it was time for some changes in my life. I must admit that I was scared. I had attended college right after high school, and I already had most of my basics out of the way. So all that was left to do was jump in with both feet and hope I didn’t drown.

That first semester back was treacherous. I ended up enrolled in an introduction to literature class that required a literary analysis of poetry and an essay on Hamlet. I was also enrolled in a sociology class that required me to write a research paper. I hadn’t written an essay, a research paper, or a literary analysis in over twelve years. Sure, I had written in those years after leaving college, but that writing consisted of business letters or interoffice memos—quite different from the type of writing that would be required in the world of academia.

I was what many would call the “typical” non-traditional student. I did all my homework and had my papers done weeks ahead of time. It was during this very trying first semester that I learned about the writing center. I will never forget the first time I walked in the door. I didn’t want to admit that I was having problems, but, at the same time, I needed help. In all honesty, I wanted a tutor who would understand how I felt, and DeDe came to my rescue. She was a non-traditional student working on her graduate degree. Over that semester she became my security blanket and the person whom I would go to when I needed help getting papers ready to be turned in. Now I am a non-traditional tutor in that same writing center I stumbled into as a confused and scared student two-and-a-half years ago. Moreover, I want to share some of the challenges faced by non-traditional students who go from writing for the middle-class business world to writing for the world of academia.

More and more non-traditional students are now enrolling in college. People of all ages are finding themselves faced with either the necessity or desire to return to college and get that degree they weren’t able to get so many years ago. Some are first-time college students and are taking English and Math for the first time since high school. Some of the students are returning to finish what they started before deciding to get “real jobs” and/or raise families.

Regardless of why they are choosing to return to college, they are faced with a set of challenges even they don’t know they are up against. They must write papers for the world of academia. If they have been employed before returning to school, they face the challenge of going from an environment, as Cynthia Haynes-Burton puts it in “Thirty Something Students: Concerning Transitions in the Writing Center,” that is “product oriented” to an environment that is “process oriented.” Not only will their instructors want a finished product, they will also require that the students go through the processes to get to that finished product. If the non-traditional student hasn’t worked in an environment that requires them to write, many of them will be writing for the first time since high school. The one thing they all have in common, regardless of what they have done in the interim between high school and their return to college, is the terrible memory of their eighth-grade English teacher bleeding on their papers with a red-ink pen because they didn’t have commas in the right place.

As a tutor in the writing center, I found myself faced with two such students last semester and one this semester. Both of the students I worked with at length last semester were women who had been employed in the business world and decided to return to college to finish their degrees. What this meant to me as a tutor was that it had been years since they had had a college English class, and they were now faced with writing lengthy papers that required them to write several drafts before turning in a finished product. One of the students, “Mary,” was an English major who was faced her first semester back with writing a number of essays and literary analyses. The other student, “Joan,” worked on campus and was enrolled in two upper-level history classes that required her to produce two different 15-page research papers on two very different topics. Both Mary and Joan had written business letters and memos to colleagues in the past, but neither had any idea that writing for college classes would be so different. The student I will be working with this semester, “Norma,” is sixty years old and beginning her college career after raising a family and watching one son receive his Ph.D. Unlike Mary and Joan, Norma is starting from scratch. She hasn’t written much more than personal letters for many years, and now she finds herself faced with writing papers for a freshman composition class.
Non-traditional students enrolled in writing-intensive classes face different challenges than traditional college freshmen. Sure all college students worry about making sure they understand what the professor wants, making sure their class assignments turned in on time, and getting good grades. However, many non-traditional students also juggle families and jobs along with their schoolwork. They must re-learn how to negotiate critical writing and thinking skills, skills that have been put on the back burner. Tutoring non-traditional students is very different than tutoring a traditional student. I base this observation not only on the fact that I was a non-traditional student but also the experience I have gained working with these three other non-traditional students in the writing center environment.

One advantage of tutoring a non-traditional student is that they almost always come early and come prepared. Mary, Joan and Norma all came to their sessions having read the material numerous times and carrying pages and pages of notes. They do not sit down the night before and scribble down something just to make their tutor happy; they have put a lot of thought into what they bring in to work on. But it is important to consider, as Cynthia Haynes-Burton explains, that while these students “are more organized in their approach to assignments, they are less confident [in] their ability to convey their thoughts” (Haynes-Burton 106). Non-traditional students want help. That is not to say they are not a little scared or intimidated when they walk through that door for the first time. They are scared. When I asked Mary, Joan, and Norma what scared them the most, they all had the same response, “I didn’t want to look stupid.” Mary came to the Writing Center because she knew me from class and knew that I struggled with many of the same things she struggled with in that class. She approached me outside the Writing Center and asked what she needed to do to get help. She didn’t have the slightest clue where to start when writing an essay or a literary analysis. Joan came to the writing center of her own free will for help with her history papers. She came early in the semester to work on papers that weren’t due until close to the end of the semester. Both Mary and Joan needed help getting started with their papers, but both believed the writing center was mainly available to help them with grammar. Mary had no idea we could help at any stage of the writing process, and Joan, while there of her own free will, was told about the writing center by her professor as a way to clean up her sentence-level errors. Joan was in for quite a surprise when we sat down to look at her first draft and spent the majority of the time working on her thesis sentence, and her use of grammar did not come up even once. Norma was quite a different story. She had been on a tour of the writing center the first week of classes and found the center to be a safe haven where she could get the help she much needed with her first paper of the semester. All three of these students chose to work with me because I was a non-traditional student. When I asked Mary why my being a non-traditional student made a difference, she simply said, “You won’t think I am dumb. I don’t want some young, smart college student made a difference, she simply said, “You won’t think I am dumb. I don’t want some young, smart college student thinking that I don’t know how to write.”

What I have found in working with all three students is that in some cases, we needed to start from the beginning. It wasn’t safe to assume that they would know what a thesis sentence was or that they knew exactly what the professor was asking for in the writing prompt. Sure they knew how to produce a product, but they didn’t know how to go through the necessary processes to get to a final product that would be acceptable. I worked with Mary eleven or twelve times over the fall semester. Each time I saw she was making progress. By the end of the semester, she had come a long way from that first meeting where she brought me a paper with no thesis, no evidence, and absolutely no organization. She had learned how to go through the processes of making claims and supporting them to come out with a product she could be proud of. Each time she came, we had to work less and less on her papers. By the final paper, we really needed only to focus on surface-level errors.

While Joan made a lot of progress in the six or eight times I worked with her, her story doesn’t have such a happy ending. The help that Joan wanted and the help Joan needed were very different kinds of help. She had become so accustomed to producing a product that she wanted to skip over the processes needed to come up with a polished final draft. I found myself turning into a cheerleader just trying to get her through with something that would pass as intelligent as the deadline for the papers loomed ahead. She had become the student that Nancy Grimm refers to in Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times; she was overlooking her “writing coach’s suggestions for revision because she had been taught to pay more attention to surface features rather than the deeper structure of her essays” (36). I found myself moving from a cheerleader to a position in which I had to be very frank with her about my concerns. I guess you could say we both got frustrated, and Joan chose to finish the papers on her own without the help of the writing center. I do not know the outcome of our endeavors, and while it is unnerving to know she needs help that she doesn’t believe she needs, I found myself stuck in a difficult situation.

In the first tutoring session I had with Norma, we started in square one. We talked about what a thesis is and what its purpose is in the paper. We talked about making claims and backing those up with evidence. I am very anxious to get to work with this student this semester as it will offer me a whole new experience in working with
a student who has a great desire to learn how to write for academia but has absolutely no idea what processes are needed to get to the final product.

These three women are not your everyday students. They are all trying desperately to bridge the literacy threshold. Each is learning as Grimm says that “literacy is not always a happy march of individual progress but really a matter of conforming to predetermined expectations” (34). The battle that non-traditional students must fight first is recognizing what those predetermined expectations are. The students I worked with wanted a non-traditional peer tutor because they believed I held the key to unlocking the secret of conforming to those predetermined expectations. They all recognized I had walked in their shoes and I could relate to what they were going through. Of course, it’s possible that that wasn’t the case at all; maybe I hadn’t walked in their shoes but because they were non-traditional and I was non-traditional, we at least had something in common to start building on. What all three students found is that unlocking that secret is a joint project. When we worked together, using our background and our prior knowledge together in a form of group collaboration, I was able to help them use their prior experience to learn to conform.

In her book, Grimm evaluates the ability of writing centers to become a place where “tutors and students can learn to negotiate with a culturally specific way of writing while acknowledging the culturally diverse literacies that have always been part of American life” (49). I would argue that the first step in acknowledging the culturally diverse literacies would be to have a staff that is culturally diverse. The non-traditional students fear that the “younger tutors” will not acknowledge the other culturally diverse literacies that are a part of American life—a part of American life non-traditional students have lived in and been successful in for most of their adult lives. Grimm also states that “writing center people often catch glimpses of the gaps between academic expectations and student’s cultural experiences, but generally they believe that students need to learn academic literacy because . . . well, because if they don’t . . . it will hurt them in the long run . . . because that’s the way things work . . . in the real world” (29).

Non-traditional students bring to the writing center a whole new range of cultural experiences, experiences that if discussed and dealt with in the right manner, can help these students to write better papers. These students have a virtual library of information and experiences available to them that traditional college students do not have. The tutor they work with must recognize these experiences and help students use the experiences to their advantage. This is why they enter the writing center looking for someone whom they can relate to, and this is why the non-traditional students I have worked with in the past six months wanted to work with a non-traditional peer tutor. The students believed I could help them use their prior experience as a springboard to write better papers. This is why matching non-traditional students with non-traditional peer tutors is so important. By matching non-traditional students, and for that matter, all students with peer tutors who have similar backgrounds and experiences, writing centers are offering their clients something not only to themselves but to their instructor and tutors are helping them learn to follow to get a final product will help them succeed. I know this because I walked in these shoes. Without the help of DeDe and her ability to steer me away from worrying about commas and steer me into worrying about my argument and my claims, I would not be a graduate student now. She walked me from the product-oriented world to the process-oriented world.

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Works Cited