The Role of Writing Centers:
Student Learning Centers in the United States and their Applicability for Japanese Universities
ライティングセンターの役割
──アメリカ合衆国における学生学習センターおよび
日本の大学への適用について

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要旨

アメリカ合衆国の多くの大学にはライティングセンターが設置され、全学部学生に対し文章を書くスキルと批判的思考力を養う場を提供している。本論では、サンフランシスコの二つの大学のライティングセンター──カリフォルニア大学バークレー校の Student Learning Center (SLC) とカリフォルニア州立大学イーストベイ校 Student Center for Academic Achievement (SCAA)──で行った調査をもとに、アメリカの大学のライティングセンターの役割について考察する。1970年代以降のライティングセンター設置の急速な広がりには以下の3つの理由が考えられる。（1）学生の多様性の増大：留学生やバイリンガル、社会人学生などを含む学生の多様性の増大、様々なバックグラウンドを持つ学生の増加（2）カリキュラム上の変化：共通教育の中のライティングスキルを教える必修科目の増加（新入生向けのライティングセミナーと作文クラス）（3）共同学習の必要性への評価：ピア・チューターによる学生同士の共同学習コミュニティの効果にたいする評価。本論では、日本の大学でのライティングセンターの導入を強く推奨する。特に、これから学生の多様性がますます増大していく（特に留学生の増大）ことが予想されるが、全学生の書く力と批判的思考力の底上げを目標としたライティングセンターの導入が望まれる。

1. Introduction: Why Writing Centers?

This paper offers a brief overview of writing centers in the United States with a focus on their potential for student learning assistance at Japanese universities. In general, student-learning centers in the United States, where writing centers are generally housed, have increased greatly in

numbers and importance since the 1970s. The needs for this increase are attributed to an increasing diversification of the student population, with increasing enrollment from first-generation college students, adult students, students from varying socio-economic classes and educational backgrounds, as well as international and bi-lingual students. This changing nature of the student body has been met with the recognition that the student body is not homogeneous in terms of the experiences and abilities that may be considered necessary to succeed in a university setting—as students from these backgrounds are at a proportionately higher risk for failing classes and dropping out of school (personal communication, Alberto Ledesma). Amongst the skills thought necessary for university students, writing ability and mathematics skills are the two areas that most learning centers attempt to address to through individual and small-group peer tutoring and single and semester-long classes. Today, writing centers have become a ubiquitous fixture of secondary-level educational institutions, from Ivy League schools to state community colleges, as well as in many public and private high schools and middle schools, such that to not have one is a break from the norm.

In Japan, writing centers are a rarity. There are no simple explanation why that is the case, but if one looks to the reasons for the spread of writing centers in the United States, one could easily argue that there is a greater uniformity within the student body of Japanese universities and therefore the discrepancies between students' experiences and abilities has not been substantial enough to warrant the same attention. That is to say, the prevalence of adult learners, students from ethnic and cultural minorities, and international students has been much lower, and thus has not encouraged the establishment of such learning assistance centers. One can also look to differences in the general education curriculum, whereas first-year composition and writing seminars are mandatory in most US institutions, similar required courses are neither required or available at many Japanese universities. In informal discussions with my colleagues at Kanazawa University, it

is generally assumed that students will have acquired the essential writing skills in high school, thus negating any need for similar general education requirements at the university level. At the same time, however, these same colleagues realize this is a naïve assumption and that students are generally ill equipped with the writing skills, critical thinking abilities, and experience in using academic resources as required for university classes. Outside of this anecdotal evidence, there are two key changes to suggest that the uniformity of the Japanese student body is changing and that there may be an increased need for learning centers. First is the growing percentage of students attending universities coupled with the overall decrease in university-aged population. Second is the increasing internationalization of the student body resulting from increased immigration and bi-cultural families as well as from government-led initiatives to raise the numbers of "international students" (*ryūgakusei*).

This paper provides an overview of writing center in United States universities with a focus on their role and function within the overall aims of the general education curriculum. The paper is an essay based on a brief analysis of English language literature on writing centers paired with interviews conducted by the author of directors at two writing centers, the Student Learning Center (SLC) at the University of California and the Student Center for Academic Achievement (SCAA) at California State University East Bay (CSUEB). This study ends with a broad discussion of the merits and potential roles that writing centers in Japan may take. This essay is one of two papers in this present journal on writing centers; the other by Matsuda Yoshiko, who is the current director of a new writing center at Kanazawa University.

2. Writing Centers and their Role in United States Universities

While writing centers are a ubiquitous presence on most major US college campuses today, they have never maintained a dominant position in the educational curriculum. The major period of

growth of writing centers was in the 1970s, when universities were expanding in terms of overall numbers and in respect to the range of students attending. Before the 1970s, early forms of the writing center were generally attached to English departments in the form of writing labs and were specifically oriented towards teaching writing skills especially for students who had immediate needs in their post-educational careers (e.g. in the military) (see Carino 1995). The changing student demographics from the 1970s brought about an increase of women, adult learners, ethnic minorities, and international students to US campuses. With this demographic shift was the realization of a harsh reality that the diversifying student body also led to increasing issues of student retention. The initial perceived reasons for this is that the opening of universities brought in students who were not well prepared for the educational and social demands required of them. In this respect, the writing center was conceived as part of a broader field of student support, especially targeting "at-risk" students, and can be seen as part of the same genre of activities such as counseling centers, women and ethnic minority student-support groups, diversity centers, ect.

One of the unfortunate consequences of these origins is that writing centers continue to be associated as places to assist students with remedial writing or English language skills or learning disabilities, where in fact most writing centers are positioned to assist all students regardless of their perceived abilities (John Whitman, personal communication). The objective of writing centers, generally speaking, is to assist students with the transition to the university, wherein new demands and expectations about how one writes and approaches writing and research assignments are quite different than in high school. In many cases, writing centers are exclusively catered to undergraduate students and are often integrated with the general education curriculum in which students must take several writing intensive courses during their first and second years. English composition classes and writing seminars are thought to provide a bridge for students to transition and develop academic skills necessary to succeed in upper-division classes.

On most campuses, writing centers are either positioned as independent centers or are extensions of academic departments (usually English departments). They may be housed in campus libraries, student unions, or independent buildings, and some centers have satellite offices in diversity centers and student housing complexes. As most centers have drop-in hours, along with reserved tutoring sessions and/or weekly appointments, having a prominent home on campus where students study is though to positively encourage its usage.

Despite the long history and increasing prevalence of writing centers, there are still many misconceptions about them amongst students, faculty, and administrators that keep them in a minority role in the larger educational environment. First, as mentioned, there are strong associations that writing centers are remedial learning assistance facilities, thus leading students to avoid utilizing them because of fears of negative stereotyping from peers. Instructors will often send students with writing problems, expecting the writing center to "fix" students' work, and are thus surprised when tutors refuse to edit students' papers. Another example are instructors who send students en mass to writing centers, expecting tutors to take responsibility for explaining writing assignments and guiding students through them. Issues of diversity are quite complex, as writing centers that are staffed primarily by "white" tutors may discourage their usage by "students of color" (Fremo 2010).

What these misconceptions highlight is that the writing center, and the directors that run them, are engaged in a constant process of negotiating their presence, role, and value within the educational curriculum and university objectives. This has become an ever-increasing challenge as recent budgeting concerns have shifted the focus of university objectives away from a general liberal arts emphasis towards a more specifically career-focused education—and in many cases the writing curriculum has been one of the first areas to be cut. Directors of writing centers have been forced to justify their existence, and do so by showing their role in the broader university

objectives—most specifically in regards to student retention and collaborative work with other units (departments) on campus.

3. Peer Tutoring and Critical Thinking

The staff of writing centers is generally divided between directors, professional administrative staff, and student peer-tutors. The director may be either an affiliated faculty member with teaching and administrative responsibilities to an academic department, or a professional director dedicated to the running of the center. The role of the director is to set the objectives of the center, control its day-to-day operation, hiring of staff and tutors, development and outreach with individual classes and educational programs, and so forth. The director may also be responsible for scheduling, budget, and accounting, although those responsibilities are often shared with administrative staff. In all cases, one of the key roles of the director is the training of student tutors, who are carry the important role of conducting tutoring sessions. Only in the case of small center will directors directly assist in the tutoring of student projects.

In most cases, writing centers base their operation on a philosophy of peer-tutoring, in which the learning process is based on a dialogical exchange between equals and wherein the tutor asks questions that encourage the student learner to find answers on their own. The aim is to aid the development of critical analytical abilities that assist students in all stages of the writing process— understanding the assignment, considering possible themes and topics, appropriate composition, considering the audience, how to research and cite materials, the flow of the paper and use of proper grammar, and various stages of editing. The reasons for using students to do tutoring are based, in part, on budgetary issues—it is much less expensive to hire and easier to find students to work on a part-time hourly schedule. This is one of the lesser concerns, as the reasons for utilizing student tutors stems from the pedagogical benefits. By learning from other fellow students rather

than professors or "trained professionals," the student learners do not simply receive instruction (on how to write better) but are encouraged to learn how to work through the difficulties in the writing process. The main benefit is that by having students tutor other students leads to a reciprocal learning process, in which there are educational benefits for both student users and tutors. In many cases, the students hired to work as tutors choose to work at writing centers because they specifically have had positive experiences using the center in the past (Alberto Ledesma, personal communication). Stemming from this, the use of student tutors aids in the creation of a "learning community" in which students support each other, and it can be argued that it is this "community" that aids in student retention, rather than the improved writing abilities that may result from its usage (Carolyn Swalina, personal communication).

The primary value attached to peer tutoring is in its strength in teaching critical and reflective thinking skills. As writing is a form of communication, it differs from other forms of communicative practices that take place in an academic environment in that it is generally done in a solitary environment. Writing may be said to be "a technologically displaced form of conversation" (Bufee 2001: 211) that is a reformulation of a conversation that takes place not only in the thoughts of writers but also in a future conversation with readers. From this line of thought, it makes sense to extend the conversation outside of the isolated writers mind and in a supportive and collegial environment such as that which the peer tutor provides. Criticisms of peer tutoring do exist and range from claims that students are not qualified to teach writing (the blind leading the blind) or to more extreme arguments that such tutoring amounts to a form of plagiarism (in that students' work is not produced "on their own) (for discussion of these arguments see, Behm 1989 and Chase 1987). Retorts to these and other criticisms are based upon the idea, firstly, that it is not a tutor's job to teach writing, let alone edit or proofread, but rather to "converse" with the tutee about the process of writing and the particular subject and assignment at hand. In the second case, it is easy to counter

that all writing, in professional and academic contexts, involves series of revisions and editing in which the suggestions of others are incorporated into the final draft (e.g. peer review of academic articles).

4. Freshman Writing Seminars and Liberal Arts Curriculum

The continued, and still growing presence, of writing centers on US campuses stems from the incorporation of the center's tutoring services with the general education requirements of most universities that require students to take several writing based courses. While requirements may differ widely between institutions, most schools will require two to four classes (or more) to be taken in the first and second years. These required courses generally fit into two categories: English composition and writing classes and "freshman writing seminars," which are housed in various academic departments. While writing instruction is the main emphasis of these courses and the guidance and grading of student papers is conducted by the instructors, these classes often are coordinated with writing centers to: 1) expose students to the writing center to learn about the services it provides, and 2) to have students learn the various processes and stages that go into writing academic papers. The secondary aim of this integration is to encourage future usage of the writing center outside of this early exposure.

The freshman writing seminars are of particular interest to this paper, as they are an expanding focus of undergraduate education at many universities that specifically focus on teaching various writing expectations and techniques needed within particular academic departments. This section is written primarily out of the author's experience teaching a freshman writing seminar (FWS) in the anthropology department at The College of William and Mary in 2008. At William and Mary, all students are required to complete at least one FWS during their first year (with the option of taking more) as a way to gain exposure to a small-scale seminar format (classes are

limited to 15 students), that allows students to intensively study a topic within an academic discipline to not only test their interest in the subject, but also to guide and teach the necessary writing skills within the discipline. The FWS at William and Mary requires assigning writing activities that will total 20-30 pages total during the semester. The types of assignments may vary, but can include things like reading response papers or outlines, journals, opinion papers, short essays, research papers, and the like. Instructors are required to assign one class period to students to receive an orientation of the writing center and are also encouraged to assign students multi-stage assignments that will encourage (or may require) students to take part in a tutoring session.

5. A Portrait of Two Writing Centers in the United States

The author conducted research for this report in March 2010, supported by a grant from the Foreign Language Institute at Kanazawa University. The research consisted of guided tours and interviews with the directors of the Student Center for Academic Achievement (SCAA) at California State University East Bay (CSUEB) and the Student Learning Center at University of California, Berkeley. This research intended to include observations of peer-tutoring sessions and training workshops, but requests were understandably denied based on respect for student privacy.

5-1. Student Center for Academic Achievement, California State University East Bay

CSUEB can be classified as a "communing college" (meaning that a large portion of the student body commutes from nearby cities and/or may work full-time) consisting of 13,000 students, many of which would be classified as "non-traditional" (adult learners, ethnic minorities, international students, ect.). CSUEB is located in Hayward City, which is directly south of Oakland and Berkeley, and is in the hilltop just outside of the city center with an expansive view of the San Francisco Bay. The SCAA is on the second floor of the library, which is centrally located on

campus. As one gets out of the elevator or walks up the stairs of the library, the SCAA is prominently visible and marked with a banner along the reception desk. The desk is staffed by a student worker who is primarily responsible for taking appointments and pairing walk-in students with on-staff tutors. On the right hand side of the reception desk are two offices, one a small office housed by the assistant director and the other, which is far more expansive, is the director's office. The SCAA has many tables throughout the room that are used for individual and group tutoring sessions, there are a couple of tables with computers on the left side of the room, and there is also a small library of learning assistance materials in one corner.

My visit to SCAA corresponded with the first week of the spring quarter, during which the center was largely unused. I met with the director John Whitman, who gave me a tour of the center and talked with me at length in his spacious office with views of the Bay. Whitman, who is in his early fifties, has roots in the East Bay, where he received his education in English literature. Before coming to CSUEB in 2006, Whitman worked at Connecticut Community College for over twenty years as director of the learning center there. Our discussion surrounded the ideal qualifications of learning center directors, the mission of the learning center, and the nuts and bolts of the daily running of the SCAA.

The SCAA runs off a yearly budget of around 200,000 USD, the bulk of which goes towards the professional salaries of the director and assistant director. Other than these two full-time positions, the SCAA maintains a staff of around fifty peer tutors who are undergraduate, graduate, and professional (working) students. For the student employees, the base salary is 11.26 USD per hour, and most students are scheduled for 6-8 hours a week. Depending on the student, the work at the SCAA is part of the working requirements for their financial aid. Of the staff, 10-12 students work solely as desk staff and the remainder are divided evenly as writing and math tutors. The SCAA has approximately 2,500-3,000 visits per academic quarter and 10,000-11,000 a year,

and serves 3-4 thousand out of the total student body of 13,000. The university has an international student body that makes up 15-20 percent of the total, and an estimated one-third of the students that use the center are international students.

The tutoring sessions run on four basic patterns. The most common are the "drop-in" sessions that are set at 35 minutes long. A daily schedule is placed at the front desk for students to sign up in advance, but only on the day of the appointment. In practice, the drop-in schedule is almost always full. There are also hourly appointments that must be made one week in advance. The third type is "standing appointments," where students meet with tutors once a week throughout the eight-week term. The fourth is the Online Writing Lab (OWL) developed by John Whitman. Students are able to submit papers over the Internet and peer tutors will review and provide feedback with a 4-8 hour turnover. OWL works upon the same principles as the individual tutoring sessions, that is to say, to give general advice and ask questions to encourage reflection, rather than provide any form of copyediting support. All services are provided free to students and there are no restrictions on their use, although students who repeatedly miss appointments may have their rights temporarily revoked. Every peer tutor is required to take a one-unit training course offered in the spring quarter and meets once a week (students concurrently tutor while taking this course). The course is set up as a certification program, in conjunction with the peer tutoring association College Reading and Learning Association and at the end of the course, and following 25 hours of evaluated tutoring experience, student tutors gain "level one" certification (out of a multi-level certification scale).

5-2. Student Learning Center, University of California Berkeley

The University of California, Berkeley (UCB) is the flagship university of the UC system, with a total student population of just over 35,000 students (25,000 undergraduate) and with over

4,000 incoming students each year. Berkeley is recognized as both the oldest and, among the, best universities in the western United States, and as such the academic level of the students is highly regarded. Berkeley also maintains a reputation as an "immigrant university" in which 60 percent of the student body has one (or two) non-native parents—also referred to as "generation 1.5"—and these numbers also include international students. The SLC is located in a large room of the student union building (called Cesar E. Chavez Student Center) with glass walls that open to the surrounding wooded campus grounds. The student union itself is centrally located at the main southern entrance to the Berkeley campus. The SLC is quite extensive and maintains a full-time professional staff of 15, including the main director, three assistant directors, an office manager, and coordinators for the various academic and assistance programs. At the entrance to the SLC is a student-staffed reception desk and the path to the main tutoring hall is lined with the program directors' offices.

During my visit to the SCL, I talked with the two co-coordinators of the writing program, Alberto Ledesma and Carolyn Swalina. Alberto Ledesma has worked as director of the writing program for close to twenty years, and explained that his appointment had little to do with any professional training to become a director. Rather, his career path was influenced by his undergraduate education, in which he was a Berkeley student in 1984, majoring in ethnic studies and literature, at which time he also used the writing center and later became a student tutor himself. He explained that his career path, having gone from user to tutor to director, was fairly common amongst writing center professionals, as there are no academic programs specifically focused on training such directors. Carolyn Swalina also has an academic pedigree from UCB, where she studied in the communication program and received graduate education in "special education" focusing on English as a Second Language (ESL).

The first generation of the writing center began at UCB in 1973, which corresponded with the nation-wide professionalization of writing centers and increase of student enrollments and diversification of the student body. At Berkeley, the collaborative approach of peer-tutoring and student organized group work has been emphasized specifically because of the academic environment has traditionally been dominated by individual academic competition. The approach of the SLC is summarized by use of three letters "CAL" (a derivative of the nickname of UCB, which comes from the word "California"). First is "Community," where the aim is to transform the large campus-learning environment into smaller learning communities. Second is "Academics," in which the SLC is recognized as the primary academic support service for students, and run primarily by students. The "L" stands for "Leadership" and is based on the idea that students can develop leadership abilities through tutoring, mentoring, and the leading of student-run classes.

The range of services at SLC is much broader than most similar college learning centers. The academic fields supported by the SLC include mathematics and statistics, the physical and natural sciences, social sciences, and writing assistance. Tutoring is available exclusively for undergraduate students, and all tutors are undergraduates. The tutoring services include drop-in tutoring, "by-appointment" sessions, and semester-long individual tutoring. There are a number of course offerings available for credit. These include adjunct course that are linked to specific lower-division lectures, and are open only to students currently enrolled in the corresponding courses. These classes use lecture materials and reading assignments to help students develop effective critical reading, writing, and reasoning skills, as well as teach exam-taking strategies. There are "Student-Coordinated Courses" that are developed and taught by undergraduate students. Study Strategy Seminars are available to teach students study strategies in a small-group seminar format. And there are several forms of semester-length and single-session "Writing Workshops" that bring

together students in particular sections of reading and composition classes to develop collaborative approaches to specific writing projects.

The Berkeley SLC maintains a staff of 60 writing tutors (of which only one is a graduate student) out of over 200 tutors altogether. The average workload is 6 hours of week, primarily as drop-in and individual appointment tutors and the average salary is 12-16 USD per hour of work (overall budget for student salaries is 65,000 USD a year). Every new tutor is required to take a 12-week training course, which provides two credit hours towards their degrees. All new and continuing tutors also have small group review and mentoring sessions to review and discuss tutoring experiences and issues that have come up in tutoring sessions. Many of the tutors are English majors or from humanities-based departments, although there is a broad range of majors represented. There are even tutors who are non-native English users. Most students who work as tutors do so less for the salary, but from the desire to help their fellow peers, which in many cases stems from their own experiences at the writing center. When new tutors are hired there are a number of requirements and considerations that are taken into account. First, all tutors are required to maintain a 3.0 grade point average, have completed the general education reading and composition requirements, have no more than one incomplete or failed course. Outside of these requirements, the qualities sought out of new tutors are primarily that they are "collaborative" and are also "able to accept feedback." During the interview, students bring a sample writing to show their writing skills and also go through a mock tutorial (five minutes) to test their communication abilities.

6. Conclusions: On the Possibilities of Writing Centers in Japan

To what degree can the model of US writing centers be applied to Japan? On the outset, there seems to be many obstacles, differences in educational philosophy, institutional culture, and

disparities in general education curriculum, which suggest there is little room to implement a similar model for a writing center in Japanese universities. There are fewer concerns in Japanese universities about student retention and there are perhaps less "at risk" students, who are often identified as "first generation" college students, students of ethnic or social minorities, or non-native Japanese speakers. There is little history of collaborative learning pedagogy to support a peer-tutoring format. And furthermore, there are few institutions that have mandatory academic writing and composition courses in the general education curriculum. Despite these differences, there are a number of reasons that one can make to support their implementation into Japanese universities.

First, one can look at trends towards an increased diversification of the student population. This can be attributed foremost to the decreasing birthrate in Japan that has led to, and will continue to, fewer college-age (18-22) adults, which threatens the ability of universities to meet their enrollment expectations. With fewer students applying to individual schools, the range of student abilities, tested primarily through entrance examinations, has widened. While there is no direct support to suggest that schools are accepting students with lower academic abilities, wherein a writing center may be positioned as responding to students with remedial abilities, it does offer support to the argument that not all students will be equal in terms of experience and abilities.

To confront the decreasing student population, most schools, under the direction of government policies, have been working to increase the number of enrollment opportunities to adult learners, transfer students, and international students. An argument in favor of establishing "learning assistance" centers, which would house writing programs, can be most strongly made in relation to the increase of international students. The Japanese government has actively promoted the increase of foreign students (*ryūgakusei*) for the past 20-30 years, and the most recent goals have ambitiously aimed to increase the number three-fold, from 100,000 to 300,000 by 2020. This

increase means that there will be a larger proportion of students at most campuses that have specific needs to learn Japanese language writing skills as well as assistance that would extend outside of "Japanese as a Second Language" education curriculum.

Second, arguments to support the establishment of writing centers can be linked to unattended needs of current students and faculty. As hinted in the anecdotal evidence in the introduction, even students who have strong academic abilities have not had experience writing essays, term papers, and other writing assignments similar to what are expected in university classes—or will be expected of them in their respective careers. While it is certainly the responsibility of instructors to give writing assignments and instruction to students to develop these abilities—and feedback is given in the form of requests for revisions and grades—it is particularly challenging for instructors to attend to the individual learning needs of all students (e.g. through one-on-one tutoring). Again anecdotal, there is evidence that students are relatively unprepared by the time they are fourth-year students and required to write a "senior thesis"—leading to poorly written theses, poor research skills, improper use of citations and referencing, and in some cases outright plagiarism. The establishment of writing centers, especially along with curriculum development including the establishment of "freshman writing seminars," has been shown in the United States to positively address the jump and change in expectations for students entering college, and could be seen as having similar positive influence in Japan.

Finally, rather than simply addressing the issues of needs, one can look to the peripheral benefits of writing centers (and writing curriculum) on the development of students. The collaborative learning approach of most writing centers is perceived as beneficial to both tutors and tutees, as it helps both develop critical thinking and analytical skills alongside increasing communicative abilities. Successful writing centers aim at creating communities of learning, thereby giving students new spheres of interaction, support, and friendship that strengthen their

social ties and commitment to the school and peers. Taking a quote from a SLC pamphlet on the writing program, the writing center "works under the assumption that all writers, regardless of their experience and abilities, benefit from informed, individualized, and personal feedback on their writing." In this respect, one should not look at writing centers simply to provide "solutions" to problems that remedial student learners or second language students may have, but rather as a highly regarded and tested model for improving student educational abilities and independence, and for developing the overall university educational curriculum. In the increasingly competitive environment, in which Japanese universities must actively seek to improve their educational programs and outreach to non-traditional students, writing centers can be equally regarded as a potentially powerful tool for recruitment and the improvement of student services and educational curriculum.

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