Established primarily to provide writing workshop support to students, and assistance to faculty interested in using writing to engage students in active learning and thereby in improving the quality and range of their literacy, the Writing Center conceives its task broadly. Its faculty and staff are mindful that literacy is learned through use across contexts and over a lifetime. The Writing Center has reached out to involve itself in the teaching and uses of literacy in both the communities and schools that send students to MSU, and the communities and workplaces students enter upon leaving MSU.

**DIRECTOR TRIXIE G. SMITH CITES CENTER’S REPUTATION**

Prior to coming to MSU in 2007, Dr. Trixie G. Smith was directing the Writing Center and the Writing Project at Middle Tennessee State University. The year she interviewed at MSU, she was out of the Center and directing the teaching assistants for a year. Asked what she found when she came to MSU, Smith says the MSU Writing Center’s reputation preceded it.

“When I came here, the Michigan State Writing Center already had a good reputation in the broader writing center world. With the work that Patty Stock, Janet Swenson, and others had done, I was excited to be coming into a center that had connections to the rhetoric and writing program as well as American studies...because I do pop culture work. So I was excited for all those combinations, and this center was twice the size of the center I had been directing. It has since doubled again.”

Smith says that much of that growth has come from opening satellite Writing Centers on campus. When she came to MSU, Trixie says, the Writing Center had the satellite in the library, and partnerships with the...
THE MSU WRITING CENTER INTERVIEW

MUSES magazine sat down with Dr. Smith in April 2013 for an in-depth interview on The Writing Center and its 20th anniversary.

Q: What typically happens when a student comes in looking for help?

A: A typical session starts with a consultant greeting a client and asking them if they’ve ever been to the center before, so they can explain how we work if they haven’t. We let them know that we want them to feel in charge of the session, and we want to help them be better writers and not just fix the product. And, we want to know what they’re actually concerned with that day.

Sometimes they can tell us what they want to work on, sometimes they really can’t. We get very generic things like “I want to work on grammar,” or “I want to fix my paper,” “My teacher says I need to work on flow, but nobody really knows what that means,” or “The grammar has become a catch-all phrase to say anything in my paper that needs to be fixed.” Of course, sometimes, it really is a grammatical and mechanical issue, particularly with the 50 percent of our clients who are non-native speakers.

The session is going to proceed from there depending on what they want to work on. So, they might be at an early stage, and they have an assignment sheet and need to brainstorm what they want to do. If they have a draft, usually at some point in the session, we’re going to read through the paper. Typically, we’ll have them read it out loud. Most students haven’t read their own writing. Just hearing it helps a lot. When you stumble over something, you think, “Ooh, I should fix this.” Very rarely, but sometimes, we’ll have a client who doesn’t want to read it out loud, so the consultant will read it out loud if the student says it’s okay.

It’s just a conversation from there. So, mostly what consultants do is ask a lot of questions, or say, “I don’t understand this. Explain it.”

Q: What are people coming to the writing center looking for and what do you provide?

A: Well, they’re all looking for some kind of help with composing projects. And I say “composing” because it might be a traditional written thing, or it might be a website, a video, or a brochure. Or, with faculty, it might be their blackboard site and materials for their classes that they want to improve. Whatever the concern, it definitely means a variety of things.

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It’s just a conversation from there. So, mostly what consultants do is ask a lot of questions, or say, “I don’t understand this. Explain it.”
Q: Do you have volunteers, or are all of your consultants paid employees?

A: All of our consultants are paid. We have three kinds of employees: undergrad hourly, grad hourly, and grad assistants. We don’t really have volunteers. However, the WRA 395 class, which is the writing center theory practices class that undergrads have to take before they apply to work in the Writing Center, does have a service-learning component. Students have to observe and co-consult, and then consult in the center. So, when they’re in training, they have to do that and they may call it volunteering. I view it as a sort of internship.

A lot of the grad hourlies are teaching. You can work nine additional hours if you are a grad assistant. So, they’ll come work 5-9 hours, particularly if they’re from other disciplines, because they find it helps their teaching and their work with the community. We have a slew of history PhDs right now, because a couple of people came in and found it improved their teaching, and they spread the word.

For instance, several students from Anthropology told others: “This has helped my writing. It has helped me converse in the community when I’m doing research, because I have to talk to people all the time, and get to know them, and work with them quickly.” So, it helps them learn those skills they need in order to do community work and research. Of course, we also see a lot of people from Rhetoric and Writing, English, Linguistics, and Education.

One of the things our grad assistants do is serve as graduate coordinators. All of the satellites, for example, have a graduate coordinator who serves as a liaison with us here in the main center. They are a kind of first contact for the students working in those locations, so they do a lot of problem solving and taking care of admin issues like time sheets. We couldn’t run 10 locations without them. So our grad assistants are very important, and, in turn, we meet with them every two weeks to make sure we’re meeting their needs, solving their problems, and helping them grow as administrators, mentors and problem solvers. That gives them a chance, too, to have a lot of input on how things run in the center; how things happen. They serve as consultants to us, really.

Q: Are there non-monetary benefits to being a Writing Center consultant?

A: Definitely. One of the great things our consultants find is how much working with others improves their own writing. Working with so many different writers, seeing different forms and genres, helping others analyze their writing, all helps them. It helps them be more confident in their writing, too, which always improves writing.

I think it pays off for them, too, in the job market; the writing and the consulting. They’ve helped other writers, they’ve done teaching and training, they can say, “Yes, I have consultant experience.” It’s one of the things I like to work with when advising PW (Professional Writing) students: How do you put the work that you did with the Writing Center into your portfolio?

We did a workshop on that for our staff, as well, answering the questions: How do you present the work that you’ve done here on your résumé? How do you translate that to skill that employers want to see, i.e., consulting, handling projects, working in groups, working independently, doing research – all those things.

Q: What are some of the things you see coming in the future?

A: Many centers are looking toward what it means to be a multi-literacy center, and we’re actually helping lead the way in that. We’ve done some presentations, and Dave Sheridan, who was previously associate director of the Writing Center, put out the only book that’s out there on multi-literacy centers. We’re also working on what it means for the Writing Center to support faculty writing and graduate writing. Again, we’re leaders in those areas. Every time someone asks about graduate writing on the list serve, they get referred to us. We’re working on faculty writing and faculty training, too. Workshops for faculty, I typically lead. The last time we did the week-long STAF (Strategies and Tools Across Fields) workshop, in 2011, we had 25 faculty across the curriculum. It went very well, and we chose a really good cohort that was truly invested in improving their own teaching of writing and the kinds of assignments they were giving students in med school, vet school, sociology, etc. They were from all over.

Q: What have been some of your more unusual requests from clients?

A: Consultants have been surprised a few times when a student came in asking for help composing a text message to someone, such as “I need a better-worded message to this guy.” Or we’ve had students come in who have to do tweet responses in their classes, who were having a hard time with character limit, and we helped them think about that and what that means.
Q: Does the Writing Center engage in many collaborative writing activities?

A: We’ve had build-a-story and card-making stations, many times, during International Writing Center Week. And we regularly have game night. We started with just doing word games, but it’s expanded to anything requiring strategy and logic. We also have “open mic” night every semester. Our community creative writing center started this year. That’s a partnership with the East Lansing Public Library. Then, there’s the Community Writing Marathon, and involvement with some of the people from the Fiction 440 flash-fiction series.

International Writing Center week is always the week in February that includes Valentine’s Day, and we’ve done some crazy things for that. Last year, we had a beach party in February. We had some word games and limbo, blow-up swimming pools and plastic fish, and beach food to help break the winter monotony.

Q: What types of activities are going on behind the scenes at the Writing Center?

A: Two of our most important areas of focus are ongoing professional growth and research. We have a lot of research happening in and through the Center, we’ve had a lot of grants over the years, and we’ve even had a few dissertations completed. I’m now working on a bibliography on the website that includes the articles about research written about or inspired by the MSU Writing Center. There’s been a lot of that through the years.

Since I came here, I’ve worked to emphasize that this is a research center. So we always have somebody doing research. That includes our consultants doing collaborative projects to improve or analyze the work we’re doing. Every year in the fall, we take a good number of students to the Michigan Writing Center Association Conference, as we do to our regional conference in the spring as members of the East Central Writing Association. We took 20 students to the conference this year, and they all presented. We really encourage this type of work in the center: researching and documenting projects.

In fact, the creative writing groups we have now came out of a research project. We had a number of English students who enjoyed creative writing, and they said: “We don’t really serve creative writing here in the Center. What can we do about that?” So, they formed a group and started researching it. The next year, we applied for and won a grant to continue that research and to test some things. And we started the first group, and developed some training materials that we used with our consultants to make sure they feel comfortable working on creative writing with creative writers.

In another project, one of our consultants who is a psychology major was very interested in the MBTI or Myers Briggs Test and personality type and how that affected consulting. She did a grant with that, as well, presented her research and results at a couple of conferences, and actually had it published through the MSU Honors College. We conducted some staff training out of that, too.

We’ve also been doing a large multi-layered research project in conjunction with our graduate writing groups. There’s been one article already, and two or three more will be coming out of that research.
“Two of our most important areas of focus are ongoing professional growth and research.”

Q: The Writing Center began 20 years ago, and the College is now celebrating its 50th year. What do you see for the future?

A: We definitely see having more formal connection with faculty, training, and tier-two writing. What that will look like, I’m not certain. But I do think that’s one of the areas where we keep getting called upon to help.

I also think engagement with the community is going to continue and grow. When the Red Cedar Writing Project and the Writing Center were connected, most of the engagement came out of the Writing Project. So, when the Project and the Center were split, it left a hole with respect to what the center itself was doing with engagement. So, that is part of what we’ve been gradually building back up.

“Realistically,” Smith says, “this Center couldn’t have doubled in size the way it did if the director was still doing the Writing Project, so it has truly allowed growth in both.”

“A Writing Center consultant (above) assists a student by making suggestions on alternate ways that she can communicate her key messages.”

“People write everything now. It might be blogging, texting, or some other form, but they write everything. They don’t call people on the phone. Learning the appropriate way to write in all these different contexts, for all these different audiences, is very important.”

—Trixie Smith