



Innovating Writing Centers and Online Writing Labs outside North America

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Bio Data:

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Abstract

This study highlights the writing difficulty of tertiary students in ESL or EFL contexts. It describes two successful innovations, writing center and online writing lab, initiated by North American institutions of higher learning to intervene in the writing crisis. Enquiries on initiative efforts by a few Asian and European universities in innovating writing centers and online writing labs are conducted through their websites, practitioners' reports, and e-mail interviews. The purpose is to learn from their common and differing practices to inform faculties who are interested in setting up their own institutional writing centers and online writing labs. Based on the Asian and European writing centers investigated, several generalizations can be drawn that may provide some insights for innovating writing centers and online writing labs in Asia.

Keywords: Writing Center, Online Writing Lab, Innovation, Writing, EFL

Introduction

The importance of writing ability cannot be overstated be it writing in the first or

the second language. Students generally demonstrate the extent of their learning through writing. Faculties too primarily evaluate students through students' writing. Hence, students who are poor with written expression are often at serious risks of failure in an academic study program.

Yet, despite all the emphases given to writing instruction, students' writing remains a constant complaint in both English as the first and the second language educational situations. The series of articles on *Johnny or Jane Can't Write* and the concrete data for the NAEP's writing assessment (Manzo, 1999) affirm the predicament in the context of English as the first language. The empirical study in an ESL context (see Tan, 2008) attests to the same adversity of undergraduates' writing in English. Causes of students' poor writing abilities are also as numerous as the practical reasons for writing well. In addition to the ineffective lecture method in teaching writing mentioned earlier, other causes are traceable to large class sizes, especially in the ESL/EFL contexts (Warschauer and Ware, 2006). As a result of inadequate teacher attention, a reductionist approach to writing treats writing as a separate skill from reading, speaking and listening skills, and it fosters a writing pedagogy that is teacher-centered. Consequently, students do not have the chance to select their interested writing topics and correcting surface errors in writing becomes overly emphasized (Clippard, 1998). One more reason may be the disintegration of print culture and the onset of visual TV, popular music (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967), video games, multimedia, computers, and movies. The new media of the audio-visual society may have shifted the attention of students away from focused reading and writing, and thus leads to a decline in their overall writing ability.

Against this backdrop of the writing crisis, writing centers (WCs) in North

America have contributed to improve the writing ability of and the positive attitude towards writing for most students (Griswold, 2003; Langston, 1996; Ronesi, 1995). Consequently, the use of WCs as an intervention approach to writing problems of student writers has sparked interest of many education institutions, domestic and international alike, into developing a WC for individual institutional use (Mullin, 2000). As the application of WC and its virtual counterpart, online writing lab (OWL), are relatively new in most Asian countries, a study of WC and OWL innovations outside North America may help faculties in adopting and adapting an appropriate model for institutional applications. This study also investigates similar innovations in some European countries, for the purpose of comparison.

From the late 1990s, cases of innovating WCs outside North America have been heard of in a few Asian and European countries. In Asian countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea, the infusion of WCs and OWLs has been effected by Westerners who took up a teaching or professional contract at the institutions. For example, Ted Knoy at the National Chiao Tung University of Taiwan (see http://www.cc.nctu.edu.tw/~tedknoy/html/w_eng.htm), Julia Gardner at the National University of Singapore (see <http://www.usp.nus.edu.sg/writingcentre/>), and Adam Turner at the Hanyang University of Korea (see <http://hanyangowl.org/mod/resource/view.php?id=21>).

A thorough web search through an online list of universities in Thailand and Philippines and an exhaustive check through the full list of public universities in Malaysia did not return any hit based on the search term *writing center* or its British spelling. However, the possibility of WCs and OWLs or their prototypes of the sort existing in these Asian countries cannot be ruled out, given that

universities and colleges of these Asian countries have sent faculty members to pursue doctoral studies in North America, and these overseas postgraduate students are likely to bring back ideas about WCs and OWLs. Another possibility could be the exposure to WC and OWL literature, as the field has existed since the early 20th Century.

For the purpose of comparing North American and non-North American WC innovations (confined to only Asia and Europe), three WC innovations in Hong Kong, and one each in Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, and Korea are discussed before considering WC innovations in Europe.

Writing Center Innovations in Asia

A few universities in some Asian countries, e.g. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore have some kind of organized support to help their students learn the art of academic writing. The writing support is usually subsumed under a broader service, e.g. a self-access centre or a learning centre. Some of these writing support systems have gone online to disseminate information about the physical centers, or to provide downloadable writing references.

Two WC innovations in Hong Kong have been reported (Hayward, 1994). The Baptist College in Hong Kong started the WC known as Writing Enhancement Service when the teaching staff found that their students had problems with writing their term papers and theses despite going through a first-year EAP course. The WC employed four full-time tutors to provide voluntary help in all aspects of writing for students who were writing up projects in their major fields. Although the WC was generally successful, it faced some major problems. Students tended to ask for proofreading help, or help with other skills such as

listening or speaking. Some teachers used it as a “dumping ground” for students who were generally weak in English.

The WC at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was established as part of its Independent Learning Centre (ILC) for several reasons. Housing the WC in the ILC helped save tutorial time. Students could work independently in areas where they could work by themselves by referring to available resources such as writing models and guidebooks. This arrangement helped students see tutors as someone “who helped them to help themselves”. In addition, counselors at the ILC could direct weak students to relevant resources at the centre. The WC in the ILC also helped to attract students who were normally only concerned with academic writing to visit the ILC, and thus opened their eyes to the other services of the ILC. These students would then function as informants about the ILC to other students. Most importantly, the presence of the WC in the ILC sparked interest followed by commitment in improving academic writing by students and faculty staff across all departments at the CUHK.

Today, universities in Asia that had started some form of writing support initiatives years ago have generally extended this kind of support online, and the CUHK is no exception. Its English WC website at <http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk> stresses that the WC does not provide proofreading service, and the tutors will help on style, and not the content of writing. The website also gives the opening hours of the WC, and other services such as self-access and CALL language resources provided by the ILC.

Another university of Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) has developed very impressive online writing support in its English Center (see <http://ec.hku.hk/>). Although HKU does not have a name like WC or OWL, its

online writing support is provided via two online self-access and fully guided websites known as The Writing Machine and The Writing Turbocharger. The Writing Machine helps students master the process of writing academic essays based on 10 online self-help sections on writing skills such as writing the introduction, paragraph development, referencing skills, proof-reading and editing, while The Writing Turbocharger shows students how to tap potentials from using ICT in writing better essays right from their very first essay in university. This systematic guide teaches writing skills alongside computing skills.

In language learning technology, numerous innovations have been initiated out of the enthusiasm of individuals, and not from top management directives. For example, in the old days of CALL, a British professor named John Higgins designed a number of English language software programs from his strong personal interest in this area. Similar personal interest and commitment prompted Ted Knoy to design the very first Chinese OWL when he was a faculty member at the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan. His OWL website is bilingual, in both English and Chinese. Other than providing online resources such as downloadable guides for various writing skills in particular technical fields (that seems to be his stronghold) and advertisements for various language skill courses; its unique feature is the online tutoring request submission form. He extends this free service to anyone and invites the submission of manuscripts for his online tutors to provide general comments within 48 hours.

In addition to the writing support initiatives discussed in the preceding sections, the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) website currently shows only one link to a tertiary WC in Asia (see

<http://writingcenters.org/owcdb/index.php?mwa=id:18>), that is the Japanese WC at Osaka Jogakuin College. Another better known Asian WC, the Korean WC at Hanyang University of Seoul, surprisingly, is not listed. The Japanese WC reflects the features of an Information OWL described by Koster (2002), and its physical WC resembles the Extracurricular WC described by Hilgers and Marsella (1992). Out of its eight writing resource links, one is to the IWCA homepage and a listening practice site, the rest are all grammar resources with two links that provide explanation in Japanese (see http://www.wilmina.ac.jp/studylink/Writing_Center/index.htm). The homepage encourages students to visit the physical WC, located in the Self-Access and Study Support Center, to improve their writing. A possible reason for the Appointment link in Japanese is perhaps to make it more visible to students. In the Index panel, the Writing Plagiarism Guidelines and FAQs are in both English and Japanese. This bilingual OWL might be good for Japanese students with very limited English to get started.

Efforts to start a WC at the University of Tokyo have also been initiated since mid-2005. It was reported that a Japanese professor invited a North American WC practitioner to provide consultancy in establishing a WC at the University of Tokyo (Diamond, 2005).

The website of the National University of Singapore WC also has a simple design, reflecting that of an Information OWL too (Koster, 2002) (see <http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/writingcentre/>). The information given includes the writing center's philosophy, the scope and nature of peer tutoring, the opening hours of the WC, event and workshop announcements, the work duties of a writing assistant, an application link for the post of a writing assistant, FAQs,

feedback from users, and links to academic writing resources, conventions and styles, dictionaries, concordances and other WCs. The WC offers free individual face-to-face peer conferencing to only undergraduate students who are following the University Scholars Program (USP). Hence, the WC is Cocurricular (Hilgers and Marsella, 1992). The USP program of the National University of Singapore aims to nurture “the intellectual, leadership, and personal potential of promising students” through “a rigorous broad-based multidisciplinary curriculum and exciting local and overseas research and beyond-the-classroom learning opportunities” (USP, 2005). The USP WC does not offer phone or online a/synchronous conferencing. Students from various semesters and working at various stages of their writing assignments can make an appointment through e-mails to consult a Writing Assistant. The Writing Assistants are selected from USP students who are either in the first or second year, and who have performed well academically especially in the Writing and Critical Thinking Module. The short-listed applicants will be trained and they normally work three paid hours per week. The WC also conducts workshops of writing concerns occasionally.

Different from the WC at the National University of Singapore that serves only undergraduates of a specific program, the Korean WC at the Hanyang University Center for Teaching and Learning serves both faculty members and graduate students. According to the website, the WC offers “free individual help editing English writing for content, organization, flow, logic, and style.... Important differences between Korean and English writing style can also be explained.” (<http://ctl.hanyang.ac.kr/writing/>). Like the WC at Singapore, the Korean WC too does not proofread a paper for minor errors in grammar or spelling either. The WC also does not correct assignments or coursework. Instead, its OWL provides

proofreading tools for users to self-check their work. Users can either submit their work on paper or by e-mail before they confer face-to-face or via e-mail with the WC director to discuss their writing. The WC does not seem to employ peer tutors, and it is more of an Extracurricular WC (Hilgers and Marsella, 1992).

As compared to the Singaporean OWL, the Korean OWL is more sophisticated in terms of static contents and interactive tools. It reflects the Interactive OWL model Koster (2002) describes as it has a Writing Tips Bulletin Board to display answers to users' questions, and enlist editing via e-mail. Besides a good variety of online writing tools (including some worthy of mention such as the Visual Thesaurus, the concordance and the bilingual Korean-English dictionary), the OWL also has a rich array of linked and self-created resources to help with writing for journal research papers for various disciplines, theses or dissertations, college or job applications, essays, letters, and e-mails. The WC also conducts workshops, and the workshops' PowerPoint (PPT) files and handouts plus other PDF and RTF files are uploaded to the OWL.

The unique features of this ESL WC/OWL include some bilingual resources in both English and Korean, for example, the directions for receiving WC services. This application of bilingualism is also practiced at the Japanese OWL. The Korean OWL also has graphic organizers to aid mental mapping, for example, a visual Thesaurus. Furthermore, the director practices contrastive rhetoric to help his clients see the nuances between English and Korean writing.

Writing Center Innovations in Europe

About WCs in Europe, the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) provides some links to the members' websites or OWLs (see www.ewca.org).

The EWCA was founded in 1998 and accepted as a regional affiliate of the IWCA in 2000. Initially the EWCA consisted of American tertiary institutions operating in Europe such as American College of Thessaloniki, American University of Greece, and American University of Paris, but it now has members in most European countries. Interest on the application of WC as writing support reached its height when EWCA organized a Peer-Tutors Training Workshop in 2002 held at Halkidiki, Greece. The workshop was conducted by two WC experts from the USA, namely Paula Gillespie and Harvey Kail (Challenger et al., 2003). A positive result of the workshop was an increase in the number of WCs in Europe. Three of these WC initiatives are discussed here for establishing some differences between North American and non-North American WCs or OWLs.

The University of Antwerp in Belgium has an OWL but not a physical WC (see http://extranet.ufsia.ac.be/calliope/En_Calliope.html). The reason given for the absence of a WC is that students only have a limited number of writing assignments, thus maintaining a physical WC might not be as cost-effective as maintaining an OWL (Opdenacker, 2003). This Belgian OWL is called Calliope, and its design and development started in 2001 (Opdenacker, 2003).

The main purpose of Calliope is to serve students of the Faculty of Business Economics, who are required to take business, academic or technical communication courses in four languages including Dutch, English and French plus either German or Spanish (Opdenacker and Van Waes, 2003). Hence, the WC is Cocurricular (Hilgers and Marsella, 1992) in that it complements courses taught by the Faculty. The Calliope prototype is being designed for the fore-mentioned five languages, with the first three in use at present while the German and Spanish sites are still under construction (as of August 2005). The designers

intend to develop Calliope to complement and not to replace classroom teaching. They propose that more complex interactive group tasks are best conducted in class, while more personal self-access types of skills can be learned from Calliope (Opdenacker and Van Waes, 2003).

To cater for different learning styles based on the guided problem-solving modular approach, each self-access module comprises three components: Theory, Practice, and Case study (Opdenacker and Van Waes, 2003). The Theory component is the subject matter of the what, how and why of a writing task, for example, “press release” is explained. The Practice component is made up of exercises for students to work on, for example, rewriting a press release in plain English. A model answer will appear by clicking the “Key” button for students to check and compare their answers. The Case component presents a real-life case and questions that require the mastery of related sub-skills to solve a problem. Students are free to start from any of the three components (http://extranet.ufsia.ac.be/calliope/En_Calliope.html).

An overview of Calliope shows that it belongs to the category of a simple Interactive OWL (Koster, 2002) as users have the chance to interact with the online modules and receive feedback by comparing their answers with the model answers. However, there is an absence of interaction via e-mail or any other form of asynchronous or synchronous tools.

The WC of the Central European University (CEU) is called the Center for Academic Writing (see <http://www.ceu.hu/writing/mission.htm>). Unlike the Belgian Calliope that only serves students, this WC serves faculty and both graduate and undergraduate students across disciplines. Students can make an appointment for an individual one-to-one consultation within an Academic

Writing course conducted by the WC (in this respect, it is a Curricular WC as defined by Hilgers and Marsella, 1992), or they can meet a writing consultant for help with a writing assignment, a term paper, a thesis, an article for publication, or any career-oriented writing such as a resume or a job application letter. In this respect, it is an Extracurricular WC (Hilgers and Marsella, 1992). The appointment can be made by physically signing up at the WC or via e-mail.

However, the OWL does not conduct e-mail or online consultation. Hence, it is an Information OWL (Koster, 2002). The online self-access resources have information about discipline-specific writing, writing the various parts of a research paper, citation styles, critical reading techniques, research proposals and theses, revising and editing, time management, oral presentations, concordances, grammar and punctuation, and international language tests (CEU Center for Academic website, 2005).

The WC also conducts language courses in Hungarian, French and German for staff and students. It also collaborates with the University's Special Extension Program to train teachers in the region to teach writing skills. The website has an exit feedback form to collect and analyze data from users (CEU Center for Academic website, 2005). From this perspective, this WC is also an R&D WC (Hilgers and Marsella, 1992).

The WC at Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey, administers four well-defined writing programs for staff, graduate and undergraduate students. The Undergraduate Program aims to “strengthen students’ writing skills in interdisciplinary studies” (see the OWL at <http://www.sabanciuniv.edu/writingcenter/undergrad.php>) through workshops, individual writing tutorials with academic or peer tutors, a writing contest, and an

online Writers' Forum. The themes of the workshops are decided through student needs assessment and consultation with the faculty. Such themes present include a writing process series, a rhetorical styles series, word power, effective presentations, a creative writing series, and essay exams. The online support materials are comprised of handouts, worksheets, charts, PPT slides for each workshop, and additional practice materials for each tutorial (Sabanci University WC Website, 2005).

For the Graduate Program, the aim is to teach research principles and scholarly writing, and to foster a community of writers. Activities include an adjunct course conducted by the faculty, workshops on expository and persuasive essays, 'netiquette', presentation skills, report writing; individual tutorials for writing dissertations, and online support materials such as the Handbook for the Preparation of Dissertation and the Manual for the Preparation of Project Reports (Sabanci University WC Website, 2005).

The third program, the Academic and Career Advising Program, aims to help staff and students with their overseas university applications or job applications. Activities include study groups for graduate entrance exams such as the GRE and the GMAT, workshops for computer-based TOEFL, and tutorials on writing a CV, application letters, interviewing, and English proficiency assessment (Sabanci University WC Website, 2005).

Lastly, the Administrative English Program is a four-week summer intensive course that aims to "reinforce the bilingual characteristics of the University (see <http://www.sabanciuniv.edu/writingcenter/administrative.php>). The course is designed based on feedback from a needs questionnaire and a placement test for the administrative staff. For the Beginners level, the focus is more on spoken and

reading skills, and for the more Advanced level, the focus is on writing skills. In addition to the administration of the four writing programs, the OWL has various archived materials in PowerPoint and multimedia formats, a Bulletin Board for announcements, FAQs, Useful Links, Workshop Evaluation, Essay Feedback Checklists, English Plays, and a recommended Reading List. Due to the presence of the Online Forum and the Bulletin Board, the WC website fits into the description of an Information OWL (Koster, 2002), and the WC plays all the four roles of the Extracurricular, Cocurricular, Curricular and R&D.

Comparing North American and Non-North American WCs and OWLs

Both North American (for example, Harris, 2004; Breuch, 2005) and non-North American (for example, Opdenacker and Waes, 2003) WC advocates have expressed the difficulty in producing a representative model of a WC or an OWL. After careful analyses of four Asian and three European WCs through their websites or OWLs, it is clear that every WC or OWL is as different as every individual human. Therefore, it is difficult to decide on the features that constitute a North American or a non-North American OWL, and to pinpoint the differences. After all, the North American WCs and OWLs are also being used to support ESL and EFL learners from all over the world.

Nevertheless, some generalizations can be made. The most obvious is that the non-North American OWLs are either monolingual (in English or the native language), bilingual or multilingual, while the North American OWLs are 100% monolingual and English. The OWLs in Asia are either monolingual (usually English, for example, the Singaporean OWL) or bilingual (English and the native language, for example, the Chinese OWL in Taiwan), while those in Europe are

usually bilingual or multilingual. This serves to confirm that away from the native country, the WC approach has also been used to teach writing in other languages.

Another possible difference is that most North American WCs use peer tutors, but the Asian and European WCs seemed to use more academics or faculty members than peer tutors. The third possible difference might be the absence of e-mail and real time tutoring in Asian and European WCs. The fourth might be the lack of local content as most of the Asian and European OWLs seemed to organize their online static resources through establishing links to the North American OWLs. The reason might be that most of these WCs have been developed recently, from the late 1990s or early 2000s, and they need time to develop local content and to incorporate technology incrementally in their local WCs.

On the other hand, from the similarity perspective, most Asian and European OWLs declare the policy of no proofreading just like the North American OWLs do. Most of these non-North American WCs offer face-to-face individual tutoring, themed workshops, and a rich collection of online support materials. Some of the European WCs play an active role in R&D and staff development aside from supporting students' writing process. A final similarity is that most of the non-North American WCs also have academic writing as the main focus; although, a number of them do also include oral presentation, reading and writing for career purposes in their list of functions.

Lessons from Asian Writing Centers

As part of the enquiry, and because very little published material is available on

Asian WCs and/or OWLs, contact was made with a number of the Asian WC directors or coordinators by email questionnaire to gain insights into their experience of introducing and developing a WC and/or OWL in their tertiary contexts. In addition, the problems and constraints they experienced and the limitations in the process of innovation were a focus of interest, together with more successful aspects of the innovation process and of the WC itself. The following discussion is based on in-depth personal communications with three Asian WC directors. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of the directors are not revealed here.

Of these three Asian WCs, the earliest established was the City University of Hong Kong (CUHK) WC in 1994. The idea was initiated by a faculty member of the English Language Teaching Unit and supported by the university management. From September 2005, the CUHK WC became an independent entity by ending its affiliation to the English Language Teaching Unit, and it is now a component of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) of CUHK. According to the WC director of the CUHK, an average of 500 students use the WC services every year. The writing problems students sought help for are mainly related to resumes, application letters, personal statements, and academic writing. Thus far, the WC has not conducted any form of formal evaluation. As part of the on-going effort in promoting autonomous or independent learning, students have been encouraged to identify and rectify their mistakes in writing. This self-learning factor has complemented the WC counseling, and students were found to become autonomous learners based on informal observation. On the whole, the CUHK students who visited the WC to seek help liked the advice and materials recommended by the WC consultants. However, the students felt

pressurized when they were asked to edit their own writing because they expected the consultants to proofread their work. In overcoming this problem, the WC has to reiterate that the consultants do not function as editors but resource persons who help them edit their work and solve their own learning problems.

The second Asian WC was from the Korean WC at the Hanyang University of Seoul (HUS). The WC and its website were established in March 2004. The initiative came from its current director, who was a westerner employed by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at HUS. The WC is funded by the CTL, which is a separate entity from the Department of English. Being the only writing consultant at the WC, the director could only serve an average of one graduate or faculty client per day. The writing conference is usually intensive and may take up to two hours per conference. The intensive conference covers both higher and lower order concerns of writing. Most WC clients were initially only interested in getting “correct expressions”. Some of them changed their views on writing after the WC conference experience. Similar to the WC of CUHK, the WC of HUS has not been able to conduct any formal assessment due to the lack of human resources in tracking hundreds of clients. However, judging by the repeated visits and a high increase in publication rate, the WC might have made some positive impact on the clients’ writing.

The writing consultant of HUS felt that his application of a corpus analysis approach in WC conferencing, (I.e. Analyzing language expressions used in published journal articles in disciplines such as engineering and medicine) was convincing in getting his clients’ trust of his expertise in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The genre-based approach has enabled the writing consultant to see the difference in various types of research writing and provide a good source

of authentic examples to better serve his clients who major in various disciplines. Another positive aspect of the WC support was the small group workshops offered on specific writing skills. In the last academic term, about 25-44 faculty and graduate students attended five such workshops organized for them.

The main problem faced by the WC of HUS was similar to that experienced by the WC of CUHK, and that is, clients' demand for proofreading or grammar check. The director of the HUS WC explains the difference between the WC approach and a grammar check to his clients. Another problem experienced by the HUS WC was the absence of administrative personnel to support the WC director's work, for example, in tracking the WC usage and justifying the WC work.

In addition to the above responses, the director of the HUS WC commented that ESL tertiary students in Asia generally lack support for helping them write in English. Such a support mechanism was greatly needed given the fact that Asian tertiary students did not usually have a good foundation in writing in their first language, such as Korean or Japanese (see also, for example, Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2002; "Interdependence Hypothesis" in Cummins, 1980). The director also commented that a WC is better positioned in a learning support center than a department of English. Firstly, students weak in writing were also found to be weak in learning strategies, and by being a part of a learning support center, related problems to writing such as learning could be tackled as well. Secondly, the director had personally observed a lack of confidence in the English Department's competence in tutoring writing in the sciences. On top of the above, the director commented that a traditional classroom approach to writing was not effective in helping students write in English compared to the WC

approach. Furthermore, a non-directive peer model of conferencing was more difficult to implement in an Asian context than a directive apprentice model.

The third and the last Asian WC was the WC of the National University of Singapore (NUS). It became operational in January 2003. The WC is affiliated to the Writing and Critical Thinking domain of the NUS University Scholars Program (USP). According to the current NUS WC director, the Writing and Critical Thinking domain was modeled after the Expository Writing program of the Harvard University. Logically, the WC of NUS is also modeled after the WC of Harvard. At the initial stage of setting up the Writing and Critical Thinking domain, the NUS faculty worked closely with Professor Nancy Sommers, who was the then director of the Harvard Expository Writing program. Professor Nancy Sommers was probably the first person to suggest that the UPS of NUS establish a WC. The Dean of the UPS supported the initiative, and a faculty member, Dr. Julia Gardner, volunteered to set up the WC. Since its establishment, the WC at NUS has always been a part of the USP and it is funded by the USP. The director of the WC usually also coordinates the Writing and Critical Thinking domain.

With regard to usage, the WC of NUS conducted about 160 conferences over a period of about 20 weeks in the 2005 academic year. Some of these conferences were conducted for students who sought help repeatedly. Students who enrolled in the USP tended to seek help with higher order concerns in writing such as thesis, motive, structure, evidence and analysis. Similar to the WC of CUHK, the WC of NUS has so far not done any formal measurement on the improvement in writing of students who use the WC. However, the anonymous evaluation forms students filled in after conferences suggest that the experience was highly

positive. Examples of such positive comments from student clients can also be viewed at <http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/writingcentre/feedback.html>.

The director of the NUS WC felt that students' writing improvement was a joint effort and could only be realized when the WC worked closely with the writing faculty, who prepared the writing modules. The WC does not have problems in terms of technical, IT, or administrative support. At present, most students who visit the WC tend to seek help with their assignments for their first-year writing modules in the USP. The WC staff also plans to promote the WC as a place for other writing classes through more outreach and publicity.

Referring to the contexts of these three Asian WCs, the National University of Singapore WC seems to be closest to Malaysia as the status of English is that of an important or second language, that is, ESL. The contexts of Korea and Hong Kong are more towards EFL, where English is not as widely used as in Singapore and Malaysia (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). However, the Singaporean WC serves only one specific group of students enrolled in the University Scholar Program, who need help in academic writing and critical thinking. The Hanyang University of Korea WC serves both graduate students and faculty members from the disciplines of engineering, medicine, sciences, mainly with writing journal articles in English; and the director acknowledged that Korean undergraduates are required to write very little in English and even in Korean (Turner, 2006). The City University of Hong Kong (CUHK) WC serves all students. The WC proposed for Malaysia intends to serve undergraduates initially as this is the group that needs writing support the most, before extending the service to graduate students and faculty members. In this aspect, the CUHK WC model should be the closest fit.

Most of these Asian WCs are located in and administered by a bigger entity. For example, the Korean WC is part of the Center for Teaching and Learning, the CUHK WC is part of the Independent Learning Center, and the Singaporean one is an adjunct service to its USP program. Therefore, in terms of management and cost-effectiveness, the proposed Malaysian WC may gain from being situated in a bigger entity such as a Student Learning Center (which is quite a common student support service practiced by New Zealand universities). The advantage of situating a WC in a bigger entity is that the writing support becomes more visible to the student population, and being part of a bigger entity also ensures adequate funding (Hayward, 1994).

Concerning tutoring, the Korean and Hong Kong WCs employ teaching staff as writing tutors, while only the Singaporean WC trains students who have excelled in the USP program as tutors. The director of the Korean WC commented that a peer tutoring model is not possible for Korean culture as “age differences of even a year must be respected”, hence tutors are seen as tutors and the interaction is that of a teacher and a student; and not between peers (Turner, 2006). Another factor might be that, for non-native students of English, tutoring writing in English is a very complex skill, and may not be mastered by students without any teaching foundation and with only a brief period of tutor training. Due to this complexity, most Asian WCs engage faculty members as tutors. This model will also guide Malaysia in considering the appointment of tutors and tutor training.

With regard to tutoring strategies, the director of the Korean WC (Turner, 2006) and the director of the Waseda University WC of Japan (Yasuda, 2006) both commented that a collaborative, facilitative and non-directive tutoring strategy is not likely to work with their EFL clients who not only have to learn

the art of writing but also English. Hence, they expect WC tutors to play the role of experts in telling them exactly what is wrong with their writing (Yasuda, 2006). In considering the tutoring strategy that will work for ESL or EFL clients, the stage of learning of the student can be used as a guide (Vygotsky, 1978). If the student is at the beginning stage of learning to write, a more directive approach will be more effective. For more advanced learners of writing, a facilitative or non-directive approach is necessary to give room for learners to develop their own writing strategies and their own voice (see also Powers, 1993; Williams, 2004).

Both the Hong Kong and Korean WCs reported the problem of students asking for proofreading help, which is in practice against the WC founding principle of improving the writer not the writing. Indeed, most WCs have experienced students requesting proofreading as such reports have often appeared in the Writing Lab Newsletter and the Writing Center Journal (see, for example, Myers, 2003; Purcell, 1998). Logically, the proofreading need would be more acute among ESL clients as they have more language problems. For example, at UPM, faculty members and students are willing to pay for proofreading services in return for an error-free report, article, or dissertation in English. All these are evidence of the genuine need of ESL students for proofreading, and a WC would be counter-productive in resisting the need. Therefore, a WC proposed for UPM must be able to mitigate this “problem”.

In addition to the limited usage statistics reported by the three Asian WC directors in the earlier sections, some glimpses of the Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) WC utility were obtained from the WC news published on the OJC OWL. The news (OJC WC News, October 25, 2004) reported that 158 students sought

help from the WC in the academic year of 2004. As OJC had a total of 752 students, the percentage of students who had used the WC worked out to be 21%. The bulk of the clientele was from first year junior college (39.9%), followed by second year junior college (34.8%). These statistics are in line with the usage pattern of a North American WC that reported first year students made up the bulk of their clientele (Lerner, 2001). The statistics from the OJC WC also revealed that the type of help most sought for by students were organizing papers (34.4%), grammar and mechanics (21.1%), and vocabulary (17.5%) (OJC WC News, November 20, 2004). While these statistics may be useful for comparative purposes, it is based on just one Asian WC. Therefore, it is not suitable for use in indicating any usage trend in other Asian WCs.

These WCs and their OWLs continue to thrive, and their success can be attributed to several features linked to successful innovations (Markee, 1997; Rogers, 1995). The most important attribute is the perceived relative advantage of the WC and OWL. These WCs and OWLs have been useful in helping faculties and students improve their writing skills; and thereby, contributed to increased publications internationally (in the case of the Korean WC) and improved academic performance (Turner, 2006; Yasuda, 2006). The attribute of compatibility has also played an important role. All of these Asian WCs have been modified in adapting to local culture and practice, and there was no wholesale adoption of a North American WC or OWL model. The adaptation of a WC also gives it a sense of originality, since it is not a complete 'copy' work and as such enhances a sense of ownership. It was also not too complex for these Asian universities to initiate a WC or OWL as they have teaching staff who are well versed with teaching ESL / EFL writing and instructional experts who can

help with WC tutor training. There is the element of trialability as the services of the WC or OWL can be incremental, for example, from serving a small group of clients to several groups. In addition, the resources can be added on as time goes. This incremental feature also contributes to the feasibility of a WC, as it can start small-scale, and hence budgeting and logistical considerations are less complicated.

There is also the aspect of visibility as the physical space of the WC is often publicized by the virtual OWL, and faculties who want students to hand in better written assignments also help in publicizing the WC. The form of an innovation can also determine the uptake. In this case, the WC and the OWL have tangible forms. They can be felt, visited, and utilized. Due to these inherent attributes of a WC and OWL to any adopting institution, the risk of poor uptake can be relatively minimized. It would seem that the future is bright for the initiation of a WC in Malaysia.

While this section has provided only a limited look into Asian WCs that are still under development, this aspect of the enquiry has revealed the uniqueness of each WC in each context. The contribution of lessons from Asian WCs is to continue to provide more background to understand the theory and actual praxis of WCs and OWLs for Malaysian tertiary education.

Conclusion

As WCs and OWLs are new to most Asian countries including Malaysia, concepts and issues pertaining to innovations are investigated. Universities that used to have inertia to change must now be actively innovative to remain competitive and relevant to changing tertiary demographics. Thus, the various

principles and attributes of successful innovations should inform the planning, adoption and implementation of any innovation. Lessons can also be learned from the successful transfers of Western curricular innovation to the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.

From the end of the twentieth century, countries outside North America started to innovate WCs, OWLs, and other related online initiatives for ESL tertiary learners. Interestingly by comparison, North American and non-North American OWLs are not too different. The reason may be that North American WCs and OWLs also serve ESL students.

The online initiatives in Asian universities are evidence to a trend of using the web to teach and support English language development in Asia. In most cases, the online resource complements the physical resource and neither stands alone. However, other than the limited information gathered from the WC websites and the e-mailed questionnaire, there is very limited literature regarding the history, development, utility patterns, problems and challenges of these ESL writing support initiatives outside North America (as these initiatives are still new and undergoing development). Therefore, the present research has to rely mainly on WCs developed in North America to conceptualize a WC framework for universities in Malaysia.

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