



Short communication

## “A table and two chairs”: Starting a writing center in Łódź, Poland

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### Introduction

It cannot take an EFL writing instructor long to realize that teaching writing involves a lot of talking, mainly to individuals. The next painful truth is that you cannot spend as much time with each student as you need or want to. Is this not why writing centers were invented? Impressed by the idea, Łukasz Salski, an Assistant Professor of English and seasoned EFL writing instructor, started dreaming of a writing center at our institution, the Institute of English, University of Łódź, Poland.

With no first-hand writing center experience, he had little knowledge of how to start a writing center by himself. So he asked around, and in response he heard questions such as “What funds do you have?” “How many people are you going to employ?” “How much space do you have?” To all these questions he had only one answer: “None.” So he saw his chances as rather slim until in 2008 he met Ann Mott, who at that time chaired the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA). When he told her he was looking for a way to set up a writing center, she said, “All you need to start a small writing center is a table, two chairs, and a couple of sharp students.”

That changed his perspective. It was not difficult to find the two chairs and the table, but the only available space where they could be placed turned out to be a cramped hall leading to one of the classrooms. With improved lighting and some ad hoc decoration, it had to be enough. Finding the sharp students proved much easier. Łukasz approached the students he had in his classes, most of them currently in MA or PhD programs. Also, a couple of instructors were interested in the enterprise, and our Fulbright English Teaching Assistant became a real asset both in organizing and running the writing center, which we decided to call English Writing Improvement Center (for short, and affectionately, ERIC). ERIC opened in fall 2011. All our efforts have been supported by Melinda Reichelt, ERIC’s good spirit, distant only in a geographical sense.

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### Other writing centers in EFL contexts

In starting the writing center at the University of Łódź, Łukasz drew on his knowledge of the Polish context for EFL instruction and his own research into L2 writing in Poland; additionally, he was influenced by what he learned from attending various writing conferences. Among them were conferences sponsored by the European Writing Center Association (EWCA), where he got ideas both from formal conference presentations as well as from conversations with people who were working in writing centers around the world. We hope that the story of starting our writing center provides a blueprint for others who are considering starting a writing center, particularly in EFL environments and/or with limited resources to draw on. Additionally, the writing center literature provides useful descriptions of writing center initiatives in a range of contexts, including Austria (Bräuer, 2012; Doleschal, 2012), Belgium (Ganobscik-Williams, 2012), Bulgaria (Santa, 2002, 2009), Ecuador (Severino, 2011), France (Ganobscik-Williams, 2012), Germany (Bräuer, 2002, 2012), Hong Kong (Xiao, 2001), Hungary (Harbord, 2003), Japan (Johnston, Cornwell, & Yoshida, 2008), Liechtenstein (Bräuer, 2012), the Netherlands (Stassen & Jansen, 2012), Puerto Rico (García-Arroyo & Quintana, 2012), South Africa (Archer, 2010; Papay, 2002), Switzerland (Bräuer, 2012), and the United Arab Emirates (Ronesi, 2009). Additionally, Tan (2011) provides a brief overview of writing center initiatives in Asia and Europe. We believe that this literature also provides important insights into the range of issues that may be encountered by those starting writing centers, and should prove especially useful to those unfamiliar with the teaching of writing in EFL contexts. Additionally, information can be found on starting a writing center, educating peer tutors, and other useful topics on the website for the International Writing Center Association: <http://writingcenters.org/>.

In the literature about writing centers in EFL contexts, we noticed several themes that resonated with our own experiences starting ERIC. One of them was the need to operate with limited resources, as described by Doleschal (2012), García-Arroyo and Quintana (2012), and Papay (2002), regarding writing centers in Austria, Puerto Rico, and South Africa, respectively. Another recurrent theme discussed in the literature includes the need for writing center practice, rather than being imported wholesale from English-speaking countries (especially the U.S.), to adapt to local contexts (Bräuer, 2002; Ganobscik-Williams, 2012; Johnston et al., 2008; Papay, 2002; Ronesi, 2009). This includes the need to develop an understanding of how writing and the writing process are perceived in a given context (Severino, 2011). Like ERIC, other centers have had to operate in contexts where the notion of a writing center itself is unfamiliar (García-Arroyo & Quintana, 2012). We are encouraged by these authors' accounts of operating writing centers under challenging circumstances, and we hope to encourage others in similar circumstances with our account of how we started ERIC.

Another topic discussed in the literature by multiple authors is the training of tutors, including peer tutors (Johnston et al., 2008; Ronesi, 2009; Santa, 2002, 2009). With limited resources, ERIC was able to provide only limited initial training, but tutors are nonetheless developing their own ways of tutoring that fit local contexts, as are the South African tutors that Papay (2002) describes, and we are developing plans for further training and reflection.

The literature we reviewed on writing centers around the world also notes the range of functions (besides student tutoring) that are subsumed by writing centers outside of North America. These include faculty development, both in terms of fostering development of faculty's teaching of writing as well as development of faculty's own writing for conferences or publication (Bräuer, 2002; Ganobscik-Williams, 2012; García-Arroyo & Quintana, 2012; Johnston et al., 2008; Santa, 2009). Writing centers also provide workshops for students on various writing-related topics; support for development of English-language speaking, grammar, and oral presentation skills (Johnston et al., 2008); and assistance on student applications for studying abroad (Bräuer, 2002; Ganobscik-Williams, 2012; Johnston et al., 2008). Besides this, some provide support for autonomous academic writing groups (Bräuer & Girgensohn, 2012). Although ERIC does not provide all of the services that a writing center might provide, we have taken these broader conceptions of a writing center as our model, providing workshops and other activities in addition to one-on-one consultations.

Additionally, authors have described issues related to operating a writing center in multiple languages (Johnston et al., 2008; Papay, 2002; Ronesi, 2009). Since much of the literature on writing centers originates in North America, only a limited amount of literature is available that discusses multilingual tutorial participants (but see, e.g., Bruce & Raftery, 2009; Nakamaru, 2010; Williams & Severino, 2004), and few sources address cases in which tutorial participants share a common language other than English. We were happy to see such situations discussed in the literature since most but not all of our tutors speak Polish, the native language of the students who come to the writing center.

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