

Developing an International Multilingual Writing Center: Lessons Learned

Writing centers have long been a hallmark in supporting the development of student writers at North American academic institutions. Writing centers are often connected to a writing program or learning center open to all students for one-on-one tutorials regarding a writing project. Tutors function as coaches or collaborators, rather than as teachers, to address individual needs. Through active listening, a tutor may engage writers in discussion to help develop ideas, offer reader feedback, and suggest writing strategies (Harris 1988). In an increasingly internationalized academia, and in turn an increased pressure to publish internationally, more initiatives are being made to establish multilingual writing centers in tertiary institutions across the globe.

Although we frame this article within a university context, a writing center can adapt to most learning environments, including schools and community-based programs. As Virtual English Language Fellows, we participated in a year-long Regional English Language Office (RELO) project to establish academic writing centers at four Indonesian universities with a focus on English-language research publication. In this article, we share our insights and lessons learned from working with local teams to establish writing centers at two of the universities.

Our primary focus was tutor training, tutor development, and workshop facilitation. With this article, our objective is to provide guidance and resources to assist those interested in developing a writing center. Furthermore, we highlight our challenges to help others anticipate potential obstacles and we suggest ways to meet those challenges.

Each writing center is unique due to needs, resources, and expectations, yet all writing centers can be successful. In Table 1, we describe primary steps and considerations to launch a writing center before discussing actions taken by our universities, consequences, and lessons learned. Tutor-training components are presented in Table 2, and in Table 3 we contrast design and operational elements between our two universities in a snapshot after one year. Despite the differences, both writing centers are functioning, as they continue to meet client needs with trained tutors. Free resources to help start a writing center are found in Table 4.

We recognize that most universities or institutions will not have the benefit of grant funding to help establish a writing center. To address the possibility of a limited budget, we offer viable strategies for consideration.

Before discussing what we have learned and our suggestions for establishing a writing center, a brief review of previous studies on international writing centers, which emphasize the importance of addressing the local context, is provided.

WRITING CENTERS: ADAPTING TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Writing centers are expanding across the globe in a wide range of academic contexts, explaining the growing body of writing-center literature focused on EFL contexts (Bailey 2012; Ganobcsik-Williams 2012; Reichelt et al. 2013). Often, the North American writing-center model provides the foundation for an international writing center. Yet the need to adapt writing-center practices to the local context, rather than directly importing a model from the United States, is essential for establishing an effective writing center designed to successfully meet student needs (Ganobcsik-Williams 2012; Johnston, Yoshida, and Cornwell 2010; Reichelt et al. 2013; Ronesi 2009). This adaptation also requires an understanding of how writing and the writing process are perceived within a given context

(Severino and Deifell 2011), or as Ganobcsik-Williams (2012) describes it—the model of writing instruction. For instance, the teaching of writing may be delivered through an ineffective lecture method to large class sizes, resulting in inadequate teacher attention and an overall lack of writing proficiency (Tan 2011).

Because our project took place in Indonesia, we explored Asian-related studies, noting how the concept of writing centers has been shaped by the U.S. writing-center model; however, not all aspects apply to an EFL context (Nakatake 2013). In Japan, the linguistic, social, and cultural context is significantly different from the American case. For instance, the practice of Japanese students and tutors possessing the same authority is culturally hard to accept. Therefore, Nakatake (2013) argues that it is necessary to design a writing center to meet the needs of Japanese EFL learners.

Adding to the discussion, consideration of local context within the Taiwanese writing center was examined by Chang (2013) and Baker and Chung (2018). In a comparison of American writing centers to those in Taiwan,

Essential Steps	Strategic Planning Questions
a. Create a mission statement	1. What institutional goals will the writing center meet? 2. What core values will the writing center adopt? 3. How will the writing center function within the institutional goals?
b. Identify writer needs	1. Whom will the writing center serve? 2. What genres and academic disciplines will the writing center serve? 3. What kinds of services/support will the writing center offer?
c. Recruit qualified tutors	1. What qualities and skills should tutors have that meet the needs of potential clients? 2. What prior experience do tutors need?
d. Train tutors	1. What are the staff needs? 2. How will staff be trained?
e. Promote services	1. How can the writing center be made recognizable (e.g., brand, logo)? 2. What promotional materials should be developed? 3. How should these materials be distributed?

Table 1. Essential steps for developing a writing center (adapted from Childers 2006)

Creating a mission statement provides the essential framework for shaping and implementing writing-center priorities. Core values support the mission statement by identifying the writing center's fundamental principles of central importance.

Chang recognized the challenge of introducing collaborative learning strategies to writing-center participants who are accustomed to a hierarchical passive learning environment—an observation often noted in Asian-related studies (Tan 2011; Turner 2006).

Despite our focus on Asian-related writing centers, the significant factor in this brief summary is the need to consider the local context when establishing a writing center. For example, we encountered two key intercultural issues that shaped day-to-day operations—the use of L1 within the tutorial and a general lack of reading and writing skills—that we describe in the Lessons Learned section. Therefore, by thoroughly identifying academic writing needs, assumptions, and cultural understandings of writing and expected relationships between tutors and clients, it is possible to build an effective writing center that meets local needs.

ESTABLISHING A WRITING CENTER

Launching a writing center requires a strong project leader, a well-designed plan, trained tutors, and positive team rapport. In Table 1, adapted from Childers (2006), we highlight five primary steps that focus on writer needs and the practical aspects of writing-center administration. For each step, we offer strategic planning questions to guide decision-making. Within the discussion of each step, we share experiences, challenges, and lessons learned from working with our two universities (henceforth, University 1 and University 2). In addition, we highlight resources for further information. Moving beyond the priority steps, we address secondary priorities to strengthen writing-center effectiveness.

1. Primary Priorities

a. Create a mission statement

Creating a mission statement provides the essential framework for shaping and implementing writing-center priorities. Core values support the mission statement by identifying the writing center's fundamental principles of central importance. Clear core values act as standards for decision-making, operations, and problem solving, while the implementation of core values is accomplished through writing-center team training and adoption of transparent administrative policies and procedures.

As illustrated below from the respective writing-center proposals, both University 1 and University 2 stress core values of collaboration and improving academic writing skills. Key differences involve the target audience, as University 1 is community focused while University 2 focuses on university members.

University 1

"The Academic [Writing Center] is a site where faculty members, staff, students, and community members from within the host university and other universities develop practical knowledge and skills in academic writing necessary in the academic culture of a higher institution."

The community-collaboration value was consistently demonstrated by encouraging faculty and students at all levels to participate in writing-center services. In addition, the writing center regularly partnered with other universities throughout Indonesia to host writing workshops open to all interested participants.

University 2

"The Academic Writing Center aspires to assist students, faculty members and other members of the university in improving their English academic writing skills while revering inclusivity, creativity and collaboration as our core values."

Inclusivity was demonstrated by the tutors' adapting their language to the requests of the clients, which often involved talking about writing in their L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) rather than in English. Creativity involved thinking outside of the box to explore different types of tutoring services (synchronous, asynchronous, and drop-in consultations), holding group writing sessions, and expanding the promotional services to include client testimonials, free resources, and Instagram Live discussions. Collaboration was demonstrated between clients and tutors and the core writing-center team members by building trust through transparent communication and sharing responsibilities.

b. Identify writer needs

During the planning of a writing center, it is essential that the design addresses local needs as discussed previously; writing centers must define themselves in terms of the writers they serve (North 1984). Initially, both universities aimed to support the publication of research articles, especially in international journals. Therefore, each analysis targeted writers most likely to seek publication: postgraduate students and faculty. Analysis results revealed needs for academic skills in the following areas:

- understanding English grammar;
- understanding journal article format and rhetorical styles;
- guidance in writing the Introduction, Literature Review, and Discussion sections;
- effective usage of academic language; and
- best practices for reading journal articles.

This information was in turn used to help create tailored topics for workshops, inform tutor training, and guide tutor professional development.

University 1

Although the writing center's mission includes students as well as faculty, the writing center first focused on English, literature, and applied linguistics faculty due to their ongoing involvement with research publication. Although the university has offered limited writing-support programs for publication in the past, the programs were not fully developed and lacked a consistent approach.

For the writing-center project, faculty were asked to identify effective formats for improving academic writing skills that could strengthen their research writing and potentially increase chances of publication. Faculty noted their preference for individual consultations, followed by workshops, seminars, and boot camps.

Despite the faculty's expressed desire for one-on-one consultations, due to teaching demands, actual participation with tutoring services was minimal during the first quarter of operation. This unexpected trend prompted the writing-center team to broaden the initial targeted clients by encouraging undergraduate and graduate students to utilize the writing center for research writing. The steady student demand for academic writing support provided the framework for developing a viable writing center. Beyond consultations, students as well as faculty were active participants in workshops and seminars.

University 2

Because of the high-stakes pressure to publish internationally, the writing center at University 2 largely drew in lecturers and graduate students from the humanities and social sciences, engineering, and medical science. Among the challenges respondents of the needs analysis reported, understanding rhetorical styles of journals, presenting research results, and improving the quality of translation were at the top.

Writing-center tutors need not be “experts,” but rather serve as peers and critical readers who ask questions and promote a writer’s agency through dialogue.

As was the case at University 1, respondents of the needs analysis for University 2 noted a preference for one-on-one consultations, followed by reading and writing workshops. Self-access to learning materials was also highly requested.

University 2 also found low participation in the one-on-one consultations during the first year of operation. Although there was much speculation by the team as to the reasons behind this trend (the writing culture and preconceived notions about writing being at the top), the actual reasons behind the low participation have yet to be determined. Among all the services offered, workshops had the highest attendance and remained the most favored service.

C. Recruit qualified tutors

Our two universities took significantly different approaches in tutor recruitment. University 1 appointed three staff members from the university’s language and culture program to serve as writing tutors. The staff members had not expressed an interest in tutoring and reluctantly participated in tutor training before eventually avoiding tutoring to focus on tasks they preferred, such as language testing. This setback motivated the writing-center coordinator to collaborate with the language and culture program director to gain support for recruiting program staff interested in expanding their responsibilities into tutoring. This lesson is echoed by Cox (1984) and Cheate and Cotos (2020). The guiding principle for the development of writing centers is to employ tutors who *want* to work there.

Although the replacement tutors did not have tutoring experience, they did have some—but limited—teaching experience. Furthermore, although they had written

research articles as graduate students, they did not have a deep understanding of the research article genre. Despite the clunky tutor-recruitment process and the tutors’ inexperience, the writing-center team gradually developed effective skills through tutor training and professional development.

Meanwhile, rather than appoint tutors, University 2 hired three tutors with advanced degrees in English, experience writing research articles, and experience teaching academic English. Hiring a small, well-qualified, and committed team to help launch the writing center had numerous benefits, including high retention (all three tutors stayed for the duration of their contract) and high motivation (tutors wanted to learn), and it enabled the building of a team with members who helped one another problem-solve in every aspect of the writing-center operation. Furthermore, all three tutors brought strengths that they could hone to help the writing center thrive (one tutor had artistic skills that she utilized in creating promotional material; another tutor was working on her doctoral research concurrently and could thus empathize with others on the thorny nature of writing; the third tutor was tech savvy and therefore helpful at troubleshooting issues).

While both universities described here were fortunate to be in positions where it was possible to recruit and hire qualified and willing tutors, we recognize that this may not be a viable possibility for all contexts. Fortunately, there are alternative models for providing support to writers. For example, one could develop a writing center where learners and community members access resources or create writing clubs to share work and engage in peer review. University 2, for example, created an Online Writing League, a virtual space

Key Training Components	Topics	Elements
Writing-center philosophies	Service to writers	The writing center should: • build writer confidence. • help the writer become self-directed. • discourage the view that the writing center is for remedial writers or that it is a proofreading service.
	Qualities of an effective tutor	• Friendly • Flexible • Willing to listen • Committed to ongoing learning
	Tutor roles	• Coach and mentor • Critical reader • Collaborator with client and writing-center team
Academic writing genre	Research article for applicable disciplines	• Structure and format • Rhetorical styles
Conducting a consultation	Expectations	• Maintain a positive and collaborative approach • Ask questions • Minimize tutor talk • Focus on higher-order issues
Local writing issues	Identification	• Gather input from writing faculty and writing-center team • Collect examples • Integrate issues into training material
Develop and utilize resources	Tutor tool kit	• Tutor handbook • Client resources • Client survey
Tutor practice	Strategies	• Modeling: watch how experienced tutors navigate a consultation and incorporate different strategies • Scenario practice and role plays; mock consultations
Observation and reflection	Team reflection	• The tutor works with clients and reflects. • The trainer and/or team members observe and exchange feedback. • Progress is shared at periodic team sessions.
Professional development	Team identifies needs	• Examples: best practices; rhetorical moves found in research articles; hedging language; useful resources

Table 2. Tutor training (adapted from Cheatle and Cotos 2020)

designed to provide structured group sessions where writers discussed their struggles, goals, and accomplishments with one another. As we have emphasized, writing-center tutors need not be “experts,” but rather serve as peers and critical readers who ask questions and promote a writer’s agency through dialogue. In a related discussion below, we explore the possibility of recruiting student volunteers for tutoring.

d. Train tutors

Although the traditional Western peer-tutoring model may provide a solid framework for consultations, it is not easily transferable to a culture with a hierarchical approach. Furthermore, writing-center clients accustomed to passive learning environments may find it difficult to be an active participant within the consultation. These clients may also be reluctant to engage in self-directed learning, often promoted through the Western model, as they may expect a writing center to provide proofreading services. Tutors may also struggle, as they might prefer to teach rather than to coach or mentor a client.

Despite the cultural differences, the Western model provides solid guidance for designing effective tutor training that can be modified to fit the local context. Writing skills and disciplines identified in the needs analysis help to link training to local needs. Key components of our three-month tutor training are adapted from Cheatle and Cotos (2020) and summarized in Table 2.

While all these components are important, we want to emphasize the value of three areas due to their significant influence on overall tutor development and effectiveness: (1) identifying local writing issues, (2) developing writing-center resources, and (3) tutor practice.

Understanding local writing challenges is fundamental to meeting local needs. For example, writing research articles presented challenges at both universities and touched on most sections—from the title through the conclusion. Authors struggled to write concise abstracts, or the abstract was a copy and paste

from the Introduction section. Moving from a broad perspective to a narrow focus within the literature review was difficult and often lacked a clear gap description. Results were not clearly linked to research questions, and the discussion lacked interpretation. With this information, we integrated known writing struggles into the tutor training.

We also worked with our respective teams to create resources for both the tutors and the clients. Using examples from other writing centers as a guide, we helped develop handbooks for our respective universities. The dynamic handbooks include policies and procedures, consultation guidelines, and links to academic writing resources readily available to support our tutors. To encourage self-directed and independent writers, we created a popular client checklist for research-article writing designed to help an author assess their article for structure, readability, and overall quality. We encouraged clients to complete the checklist prior to their consultation to help them identify priority concerns.

In addition, a vital part of the training was the mock consultation practice and observation and reflection, which we scaffolded to ease tutor anxiety (Pearson and Gallagher 1983). That is, the tutors had the opportunity to jointly tutor each other and role-play in a low-stakes environment. As the tutors eased into actual consultations, responsive and timely feedback was shared by the trainer and other tutors, leading to robust learning experiences. Prior to our mock consultation practice, we shared a useful training video by Dembsey (2020).

e. Promote services

As in any new enterprise that relies on customers or clients, consistent promotion is vital for writing-center visibility and sustainability. Both of our universities created logos, taglines, and websites, and actively promoted their writing-center services through social media (Instagram and WhatsApp). The promotions included a link to the writing-center website and to the writing center’s YouTube channel, a collection

of writing-center seminars, and tutorial examples. In addition, promotional videos were often shared during the introduction of a seminar or workshop. Low-tech promotional activities included posters and team visits (virtual or in-person) to targeted writing classes. At both universities, promotions were created by writing-center tutors.

2. Secondary Priorities

After meeting the initial needs of writers through trained tutors, the writing-center team can expand their focus to building partnerships with academic units, evaluating opportunities for integrating writing skills into the curriculum, and assessing additional

services to meet writer needs. In addition, regular monitoring of writing-center activity is essential for long-term success. Because we were directly involved with the consideration of new services and program monitoring, we are positioned to share our insights.

As both writing centers launched during the pandemic, tutoring services for English-language academic articles were performed either synchronously or asynchronously. The virtual platform allowed our teams to focus on online tutoring while building effective tutoring skills. As the universities resumed in-person classes, one university added face-to-face tutoring by appointment, as well as drop-in tutoring. After a year of operation,

Writing Center Component	University 1	University 2
University organizational structure	The writing center is a program within the Culture and Language Center.	The writing center is a unit within the Faculty of Humanities.
Writing-center structure	Academic Writing Center Coordinator (part-time) Three tutors (part-time) Two tutors (occasional)	Academic Writing Center Director (part-time) Tutor Coordinator (part-time) Three tutors with MAs in English (part-time)
Target clients	Undergraduate, master's, and postgraduate students; faculty (limited)	Master's and postgraduate students; faculty
Genre	Research proposals Theses Articles for publication	Articles for publication
Services	Online tutoring Face-to-face tutoring Drop-in tutoring Asynchronous tutoring Workshops and seminars Bilingual tutoring for Indonesian papers	Online tutoring Face-to-face tutoring Drop-in tutoring Asynchronous tutoring Workshops and seminars Online writing support group
Promotions	Instagram WhatsApp	Instagram WhatsApp
Writing-center resources	Website YouTube channel	Website YouTube channel

Table 3. Writing-center snapshot after initial year of operation

By establishing a vibrant community of practice, each writing center created a place of belonging for team members, a significant factor contributing to each writing center's success.

University 1 added tutoring for papers written in Indonesian, as some authors aim to publish in national journals. This bilingual service required the writing-center team to identify specific writing concerns in the native language, which can differ from concerns related to English language writing. In addition, the tutor training was expanded to address issues unique to tutoring writers of Indonesian language papers. See Table 3 for services offered by each university after one year of operation.

All services were eventually integrated into a monitoring system to inform and support operations. For example, University 1 established a quarterly reporting process covering the following topics not only to track progress, but also to serve as a resource to promote the writing center:

- Accomplishments
- Statistics: Tutorials, workshops, seminars, and total participants
- Challenges
- Goals for the subsequent quarter and beyond
- Financial: Budget vs. actual expenditures
- Photo gallery: Promotional posters of writing events conducted during the quarter

3. Snapshot After Initial Year

After a year of establishing and nurturing each writing center, we found it helpful to contrast design components between the two writing centers (see Table 3). The contrast illustrates how each writing center adapted to its writers' needs and institutional expectations,

especially with regards to target clients and assisting with L1 writing.

4. Lessons Learned

Working closely with our writing centers during the first year of operation provided a rich opportunity to expand our exposure and understanding of intercultural issues related to language, writing, and identifying needs. Furthermore, a commitment to flexibility and adaptability was essential as plans changed, services were added, and tutor availability shifted. Lastly, by establishing a vibrant community of practice, each writing center created a place of belonging for team members, a significant factor contributing to each writing center's success.

Intercultural issues

Using the L1 in consultations was not specifically addressed during tutor training. This was a missed opportunity to explore and fully discuss the value and benefits of multilingual tutoring. Instead, our tutors were initially apprehensive to respond in the L1 within consultations where clients preferred the L1. Once the issue was quickly identified, both writing-center teams were encouraged to create a comfortable environment for clients by using the client's preferred language. Working in the L1 also reduced anxiety for the less experienced tutors.

Outside of the language issue, a specific challenge of academic writing skill development lies in the lack of writing and reading culture in Indonesia. Writing academic articles in Indonesian is one challenge, and writing an academic article in English is another. For example, often when potential clients working with English language papers were asked about what they needed or wanted, it was not realistic. As an

illustration, many clients wanted workshops and help with grammar but rarely asked about idea development, genre awareness, audience, or rhetorical moves within research articles. It appears that clients may not even know, or at least know how to articulate, what their needs are, which connects back to different cultural understandings about writing and how those understandings might shape a writing center in different ways.

Flexibility and adaptability

Changing elements within one of our writing centers kept the team on its toes, requiring ongoing flexibility while rapidly adapting to new circumstances. When faculty did not utilize the writing center as expected for research-article consultations, the center expanded services to undergraduate and master's students for thesis and research proposals. Additional tutor training was necessary to address the new academic writing genres. To meet growing interest for tutor assistance with L1 papers, the writing center added L1 tutoring during the third quarter of operation. Consequently, key English-language writing resources needed to be developed in the L1 as well. The same writing center also encountered an unexpected tutor vacancy when university administration moved a high-performing tutor to another department. Team morale was compromised while the remaining tutors tried to meet client needs. Although the writing center was eventually able to regain momentum and welcome a new tutor, it was clear that the team had relied too heavily on the star tutor.

Community of Practice

As the writing centers provided a framework defined by their membership and by the practice in which that membership engaged (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), a community of practice (CoP) was formed. As our teams came together to share tutoring experiences and exchange tips for consultations, members gained knowledge and confidence. Through this mutual engagement, members shared a common goal: that is, to effectively coach writing-center clients with their academic writing.

5. Creating a Writing Center on a Limited Budget

Financial sustainability options for writing centers may include funds from an institutional budget, external sources, internal grants, or pay-for-service. Yet, through creative strategies, it is possible to establish and operate a writing center without external funding. For instance, tutor salaries are the primary expense in our writing centers. To avoid labor costs, consider training student volunteers to tutor. The benefits of volunteering are well-established, as students gain valuable work experience while also improving their own academic writing. In her comprehensive article, Derrick (2015) presents a step-by-step approach for developing a tutoring program using students as tutors. In Reichelt et al. (2013), the authors describe starting a writing center in Poland with just a table, two chairs, and a couple of capable students. Another option for involving students is through student-led small-group tutorials, as described by Guest (2021). Students take turns in developing, leading, and managing small-group discussions on academically relevant topics. These useful resources provide an effective framework for operating a writing center with limited funds.

6. Additional Resources

Fortunately, valuable free resources for establishing an international writing center are available, including websites, videos, and articles. Table 4 provides a few recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Because the benefits of an academic writing center are well-established, and an array of resources are available to support the creation and operation of a writing center, we hope that readers will evaluate the possibility of a writing center at their own institutions. All components and factors we addressed in this article can be, and should be, modified to consider local needs and available resources. To enhance overall success, we recommend thorough planning built on an extensive needs

analysis, training tutors, consistent promotion, regular evaluation, and consideration of our lessons learned.

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Title	Description	Source in References
Writing Centers in Multilingual Settings	Practical step-by-step workbook for planning and building a writing center	Smith 2017
Starting a Writing Center	Website includes: 1. Key steps for starting a writing center 2. An example of a university writing-center website 3. Link to other resources for starting a writing center	Kennesaw State University 2023
Academic Writing and Research Development (AWARD) series	Eight video presentations on writing-center topics including: 1. What is a writing center? 2. How to organize a writing center 3. Preparing writing tutors 4. Fostering two languages in a writing center	U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Brazil 2023
Starting a Writing Center in Łódź, Poland	Article focused on starting a writing center with few resources	Reichelt et al. 2013
The Concept of a Writing Center	Article highlighting issues and concerns when starting a writing center	Harris 1988

Table 4. Free resources for establishing an international writing center

All components and factors we addressed in this article can be, and should be, modified to consider local needs and available resources.

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