In institutions of higher learning, writing is prevalent in students’ academic life as it often constitutes an essential part of their academic requirements. This prevalence is probably based on the premise that writing helps promote thinking and intellectual development, sustain the knowledge learnt from a subject area, and achieve a sense of ownership for the education received (Barnett & Rosen, 1999). In post-secondary institutions in many parts of the world, the instruction of writing skills has been largely handled by writing programs of various sorts. In the context of higher education in North America (and more recently in Europe), the pedagogical movement that has been in existence since the 1970s and is still gaining currency is called Writing Across the Curriculum, the main aim of which is to promote general as well as discipline-specific learning through writing (Barnett & Blumner, 1999; Wallace & Wallace, 2006).

In support of such a movement is the emergence of writing centers (or writing labs, writing clinics, writing rooms, writing places), which typically embrace the pedagogy of individualized instruction in the form of peer tutoring (Williams & Severino, 2004). After more than three decades of development, writing centers have become the norm in higher education in North America and increasingly so in Europe (Gardner & Rousculp, 2006; International Writing Centers Association; European Writing Centers Association). What are the appeals, then, of the writing center pedagogy that has made writing centers so much of a prominent feature in North American and European education? Among a myriad of appeals that writing centers have been reported to enjoy, I choose to elaborate on three, which I believe have relevance beyond Western educational systems.

The first appeal would be the informal, non-threatening, non-judgmental and collegial learning environment that a writing centre offers (Harris, 1992). This environment is different from and complementary to that of a writing program. In a typical writing program, instructors introduce conventions of academic discourse and various writing skills that
facilitate the process of writing. While teacher conferencing and peer review can also be important features of a process-based writing program, they differ from the peer tutoring in the writing center context in that the former are usually written-product focused, with a teacher-directed and evaluation-oriented agenda (Harris, 1992). In addition, under class time constraints, teacher conferencing and peer review exercises in a writing program typically focus on a single stage of the writing process (e.g. revising of an assignment in progress) (North, 1984; Harris, 1992).

Writing center pedagogy, on the other hand, is more student-centered in that individual concerns of each student become the ultimate focus of a peer tutoring session; thus, the discussion in one and/or subsequent sessions can be on any stage of the writing process, depending on the student’s needs. In addition, students come to the writing center with an understanding that they can work with impunity as their peer tutors’ role is to help them, rather than to evaluate them in any way (Wallace & Wallace, 2006). This non-judgmental learning environment serves well to encourage students to try out new ideas and thus grow as a writer.

The second appeal would be the motivational factor. Students come to the writing center only when they see a genuine need for improvement in their writing (North, 1984). This is in stark contrast to the reluctance on the part of many students who are obliged to take writing courses after failing their placement tests. The stigmatization associated with failure and subsequent obligation to take remedial (and, in many cases, non-credit bearing) courses often result in very negative attitudes on the part of participating students towards writing programs, which, in turn, may result in lack of teaching efficiency for writing instructors and lack of improvement of writing competence for students (Deng, 2005). Writing centers, on the other hand, provide an all-inclusive writing environment, where all students, irrespective of their levels of writing proficiency, can come and benefit from conversing with peer tutors for whatever writing problems they encounter.

The third and probably the most important appeal is the institutionalized and sustained support system that writing centers can avail students of throughout their entire education (Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). The need to enhance students’ writing proficiency simply cannot be adequately addressed through one or two semesters of writing instruction.
For one thing, writing proficiency needs time and a great deal of practice to develop. For another, students are often required to do a variety of writing projects and attempt unfamiliar writing tasks (such as lab reports, biology papers, grant proposals), most of which may not possibly be covered by any writing courses (Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). Faced with ever present writing difficulties, students typically suffer from writing block, procrastination and other writing-related anxiety. Seeking help from their content subject professors can be the solution to some of these writing problems. But very often, not all professors, with their own teaching and research commitments, have the desire or expertise to help with their students’ writing problems (Snively, Freeman, & Prentice, 2006). Students receiving assistance from their previous writing program instructors would also depend on an individual instructor’s “Good Samaritan” spirit. Thus, the most appropriate institutional response to address such diverse needs over a prolonged period of time would be the establishment of a writing center.

While painting probably an overly rosy picture of writing centers, I readily acknowledge that writing center pedagogy is not without objections. One such objection is that peer tutoring, a key feature of writing center pedagogy, is very much the blind leading the blind, assuming that peer tutors lack the competence to help with their fellow students’ writing problems (Gillespie & Kail, 2006). But then if professionals can and often do learn from their peers, why cannot students, especially with proper training, be expected to have the capability to learn from and teach one another (Gillespie & Kail, 2006)? Given the opportunity to try and develop, many students may surprise us with how much they know about writing and how eager they would be to know more. But are we ready to give them a try and are we ready to commit ourselves to the establishment and long-term development of a writing center, with great appeals but also with tremendous challenges?

References
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