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The Writing Center's Sidecar Pilot Report: 2011-2012

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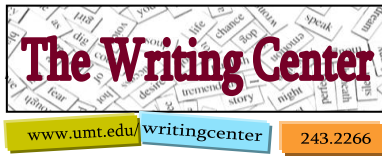
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Webster, Kelly, "The Writing Center's Sidecar Pilot Report: 2011-2012" (2012). *The Writing Center: Reports*. 8.

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Project Overview

The Sidecar Project embeds small-group tutoring in writing courses across campus. Experienced tutors meet with faculty to learn about course assignments, instructor preferences, and discipline-specific writing conventions. Tutors then work with students in small groups during four or five class sessions.

The Sidecar Project aligns with a number of established best practices in writing instruction, including some that are difficult to achieve in conventional courses: spending class time on writing; writing for a real audience (the tutor and other group members); creating a supportive setting for shared learning, the exchange of student ideas, and collaborative small-group work; and providing time for constructive and efficient evaluation that involves informal oral responses while students work.¹

This year we embedded the Sidecar Project in six courses and programs:

- AAS 415/HSTA 415: The Black Radical Tradition *w/Tobin Miller Shearer* (Autumn '11)*
 - COMM 413: Communication and Conflict *w/ Alan Sillars* (Spring '12)*
 - EDU 221: Educational Psychology and Measurement *w/Darrell Stolle* (Spring '12)
 - DIS: Drug Information Service, Dept. of Pharmacy Practice *w/Sherrill Brown* (Spring and Summer '12)
 - SOCI 445: Classical Theory *w/Daisy Rooks* (Summer '12)*
 - WRIT 101: College Composition (International Students only) (Spring '12)
- (* denotes designated upper-division writing course)

Student Responses

Students unanimously find the Sidecar Project helpful as they write their papers. They often report wishing “that other classes did this,” or that their group could have met for additional sessions. A number of trends have emerged from their end-of-course evaluations.

In-depth Feedback Before it's Too Late

One of the strongest features of the Sidecar Project is the in-depth feedback students receive on their writing. Very small groups (3-5 students) allow tutors to work extensively with each student text, and class sessions devoted to Sidecar meetings give the group time to process and apply feedback. Students notice and appreciate these factors: “The long length of time and small group allowed us to go through papers thoroughly.” Feedback is also offered in a low-stakes way *while major papers are still in-progress*, which allows students time to apply new insights before more formal/summative assessment takes place.

Social Learning: Reading One Another's Drafts and Talking about Ideas

Students often report learning from reading one another's work: “It helps me see how others dealt with similar issues.” Even less-than-perfect writing can be instructive: students note being able to find their “own mistakes in the writing of others.”

Students and tutors alike report that some of the most productive moments in Sidecar sessions occur when the conversation goes to the concepts that the course or paper is trying to address. “[It was] great to discuss topics and themes so that they make more sense.” These discussions build from each student's knowledge of course material as well as from the understanding tutors gain in their meetings with the instructor.

¹ Zemelman, Steven; Daniels, Harvey; & Hyde, Arthur (1998). *Best Practice New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

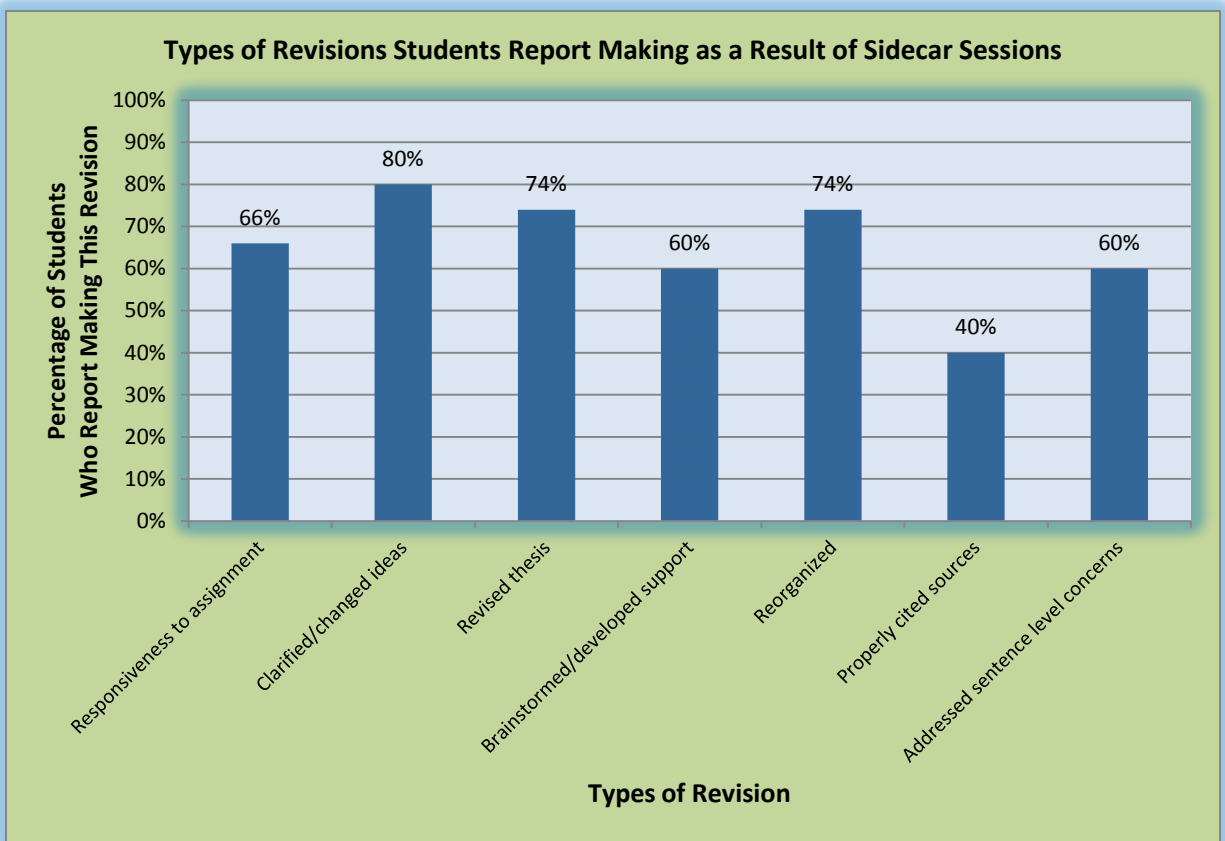
Writing Instruction in the Context of Course Material

Sidecar sessions can focus both on students’ writing and on course concepts, and the two tasks support each other synergistically. Learning-about-writing and learning-through-writing are interwoven with the learning of course material: “I learned a lot about organizing ideas, large complex ideas from classical theory especially, into a cohesive paper.” The students and the tutor together become mini-experts both in the challenges of a given writing assignment and in the challenges present in the course material.

Significant Revision

The in-depth and timely feedback students receive in Sidecar sessions helps them make significant revision. Faculty across campus often complain about how difficult it is to get students to make “real changes” to their papers. Even in classes where multiple drafts are assigned, students often address small-scale issues (line-edits, formatting) without working on the more daunting revision tasks required in academic and professional writing.

In our small group tutorials, though, students are given focused coaching on the kinds of revision essential for good writing. As a result, students report making changes to major aspects of a paper as well as formatting and sentence-level concerns.



Faculty Responses

Good Enough to Ask for Seconds

Faculty also appreciate the Sidecar Project. Most of the faculty we’ve worked with have requested additional Sidecars (and are disappointed when we’re not able to accommodate them). Alan Sillars appreciated “the extra help and extra feedback for students,” and found “the quality of comments on student drafts quite good.” Tobin Miller Shearer, who gave the most quantifiable feedback, noted the following improvements in his students’ performance:

I've taught upper division writing classes at UM five times since arriving here. Compared to those previous efforts, this class:

- *had the highest percentage of A's that I've given out thus far;*
- *had the highest overall class grade of any class that I've taught thus far;*
- *had no instances of intellectual dishonesty.*

Shaping Writing Instruction through Mid-Stream Assessment

Another benefit of the Sidecar Project for faculty is the opportunity to receive feedback on their assignments, writing instruction, and tactics for addressing common writing challenges. By checking in with tutors, instructors can learn about how their students respond to assignments and where students are struggling. Instructors can also brainstorm with tutors on how the assignments/instruction could be adapted. Like the assessment of students' writing, this assessment happens before it's too late—instructors have time to address emergent concerns while students are still working. This feedback can shape writing instruction both during the Sidecar collaboration and in future courses taught by the instructor. The Writing Center will continue to assess the ways in which the Sidecar Project helps to shape writing instruction on campus.

Ongoing Challenges

Staffing

The success of the Sidecar Project is almost completely due to our expert and experienced tutors. The number of Sidecar collaborations we can offer—already fewer than have been requested—is most significantly limited by the number of trained, experienced tutors we have available to meet during given class times. Even with additional funding, staffing more than two Sidecar collaborations is difficult due to the logistical challenge of scheduling around our tutors' schedules. For Sidecar to scale any further, we would need a larger active pool of tutors who are also tutoring regularly in The Writing Center.

Student/Faculty Buy-In

The only consistent, non-logistical glitch in the Sidecar process connects to student and faculty motivation. When students are motivated to participate fully, the process invariably leads to progress both in the specific piece of writing and in the writer; without that participation, the process falls apart.

While student motivation is not a challenge unique to the Sidecar Project, our interactions with students are not fueled by the same motivation as their interactions with faculty. We find that instructors need to emphasize the mandatory nature of Sidecar (with structured participation points and/or with frequent verbal/written reminders) in order for Sidecar to work well. Full and engaged participation in Sidecar sessions needs to be seen as a crucial and integrated part of succeeding in the class in order for the project to work.

Faculty also need to be fully engaged in the project. Setting up Sidecar sessions requires a bit of extra logistical work on the part of the instructor; without that logistical support students quickly become confused and participation decreases. When instructors are able to follow-up with their portion of Sidecar work, students benefit tremendously.

2012-2013 Academic Year Sidecar Collaborations

The Writing Center has scheduled the following Sidecar collaborations to take place during the 2012-2013 academic year:

- SW 350: Intervention with Individuals and Families *w/Charlie Wellenstein* (Autumn '12)
- PSCI 191: Political Regimes and Societies** *w/Robert Saldin* (Autumn '12)
- SOC 441: Inequality and Social Justice* *w/Kathy Kuipers* (Spring '13)
(denotes upper-division writing course, **denotes GLI seminar)*

We look forward to these and future iterations of this new initiative. We welcome questions, feedback, and the opportunity to discuss the project further with any interested parties.