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The Term Paper Clinic at WVU Libraries:
Writing, Researching, and A Bit of Therapy

When I began looking for materials for this presentation, I was surprised to discover that the concept of a Term Paper Clinic has been discussed in library literature since the 1970's. I found sources indexed under diverse terms as "term paper counseling," "individualized bibliographic instruction," "individualized term paper consultations," "term paper advisory service," "term paper assistance program," "individual research consultations," and "point of need / maximum service." The structure of all these "term paper clinics" can be as varied as the names they are called. A good workable definition can be found in the article, "Individualized Instruction for Undergraduates: Term Paper Clinics Staffed by MLS Students," by Ethel Auster, Rea Devakos, and Sian Meikle. They define a term paper clinic as "a form of individualized reference service and user education whereby students receive one-on-one instruction on how to locate and use resource materials relevant to their term paper topics" (551).

There are many ways and methods by which libraries can offer this "individualized reference service." Some libraries run term paper clinics as structured workshop classes in which a librarian gives short talks based on the audience's particular research needs.

This method, of course, is very close to the traditional bibliographic instruction session. Other libraries offer term paper clinics for a short given time span, usually a few weeks in the middle of a semester. Others offer the service throughout the semester. Some term paper clinics require patrons to make appointments while others encourage walk-ins. Clinics can be staffed by library school graduate students, reference librarians, or by any public services librarian. Based on their topics, students can receive personalized guides or assistance in using appropriate library tools and resources. In short, term paper clinics can take as many forms as they have names.

What all term paper clinics have in common, though, are their similarities to traditional tutoring. In Elizabeth A. Wilson and Joyce C. Wright's article "Term Paper Counseling: The Library's Tutorial," they outline the four traditional types of tutoring students receive in academic settings:

- 1) Standalone tutoring: In this model, the only instruction available is through the tutoring. This model is most common in British and European universities.
- 2) Course tutoring: The tutor provides supplemental assistance tied to course material. According to Wilson and Wright, "in the case of writing courses, the tutorial is commonly referred to as the writing conference." The concept of the writing

conference plays an important role in WVU's term paper clinic and will be discussed more in-depth.

3) Emergency tutoring: This type is characterized as "quick and immediate assistance" due to emergencies, for example late night group cram sessions before exams or help provided by instructors during office hours.

4) Structured tutoring: This type involves the use of technology (such as computers or tapes or videos) to instruct a student in a subject, for example, foreign language classes (271 - 72).

Luckily, I had some experience tutoring when I was tapped to staff WVU's term paper clinic because I was completely unaware of term paper clinics and their place in libraries. In the summer of 2002, I was working part-time as a Reference Librarian and full-time as an adjunct instructor for the Department of English at WVU. Because I had about ten years teaching experience, I was asked to run this new service. To me, it sounded like an ideal situation: I would get to do what I loved about teaching, helping students with their research and writing, but without I what I disliked, evaluating and grading their work.

The Term Paper Clinic at WVU's Downtown Campus Library began serving patrons in the Fall 2002 Semester. Monday through Friday from 1:30 - 3:30, I sit in a study room, armed with a laptop connected to the Internet (and the libraries' databases, of course!) and a couple of trusted handbooks, seeing students on a first-come,

first-serve basis. I help them generate research questions appropriate to their assignments, show them how to best use the online catalog, how to effectively choose and use suitable databases, suggest organizational strategies for their papers, and explain the dreaded process of citation and documentation. While I will explain grammar rules, I will not proofread papers, much to the annoyance of some students whose papers are due in an hour.

I would like to say that I thoroughly researched how other libraries ran their term paper clinics, but I would be lying. Fortunately, I found that I was relying on my past experience as a writing instructor which helped to smooth the transition from English teacher to Term Paper Clinic lady. Part of teaching composition is breaking down writing into a process: first, prewriting or brainstorming, then, drafting, conferencing, and revising. It's important to make students understand that effective writing does not happen instantly, as soon as pen hits paper or fingers hit keyboard, but is part of an ongoing process. Successful research is also a multi-step process. As Peter G. Christensen notes in his article "Using English Department Library Liaisons in a Term Paper Clinic" "[r]ather than taking the traditional view that bibliographic instruction should precede the writing process, we conceived of it as being part of the recursive process of writing and revision" (198). In the term paper clinic, I try to show students that both research and writing are interdependent multi-step processes; one does not

supersede the other, but both are equally important components in producing a college-level research paper.

When students must incorporate one multi-step process into another, it's no wonder they sometimes feel overwhelmed with writing research papers. Therefore during the Term Paper Clinic, I try to use the skills I learned conferencing students. Conferencing is a tutoring process by which instructors act as facilitators during the writing process, giving the student-writer guidance but letting the writer "own" his or her writing. Much of this guidance is given in meetings, one-on-one or in a group, that students have with their instructor. During the conference, the instructor should try to refrain from directive advice but instead ask questions about the student's writing and listen carefully to determine with what the student is having difficulty. When a student works on a research paper, s/he might have difficulties with both research and writing; multiple difficulties with an assignment can cause considerable writing and research anxiety. Considering that students show up to the term paper clinic because of this anxiety, whether writing-induced, research-induced, or both, a term paper clinic session can sound very much like a therapy session.

Lizabeth A. Wilson and Joyce C. Wright's outline qualities of a good term paper clinic tutor, all of which sound suspiciously like qualities of a good therapist.

- "The tutor must be at once coach, commentator, **counselor**, and listener" (273).
- "As counselor, the tutor must look at the student as a **whole person**" (273).
- "For many students, the tutorial session is the only environment in which they feel **comfortable** enough to expose the conditions **stifling** their progress. As listener, the tutor shows interest in the student while trying to decide what the student needs. The tutor-as-listener attempts to make an accurate needs **diagnosis**" (273).
- "The tutor should create an **atmosphere of trust** in which the student feels free to ask questions and express hesitations. The tutor should be **positive** and **nonjudgmental** in providing assistance" (273).
- "The counselor must be able to coach, comment, **counsel**, and listen. Since tutoring is a one-to-one instructional method, the term paper tutor must **feel comfortable** with entering into an **active dialog** with the student" (276).

It *is* important to listen closely and do the therapist trick of repeating back what one hears from a student ("What I hear you saying is") Students sometimes need just a friendly ear to bounce ideas off of. Many times, just simply verbalizing their interests

helps them realize what they're sincerely interested in and gets them out of that tired old abortion-gun-control-euthanasia-legalized-marijuana trap they fall into. Letting students talk also helps them to realize what points they want to make in their paper, which helps with finding focused search terms and an eventual organization pattern. Students seem more willing to discuss their frustrations and difficulties with paper assignments because I am not grading nor judging their work.

All of this one-on-one help for students can be very time-consuming. While the average term paper clinic session lasts about 17 minutes, it is not unusual to have sessions stretch into a half an hour, or even an hour, depending on how much and what kinds of help a student needs. Sometimes I find myself repeating instruction in the use of the online catalog or a database to a student who has already received such in a bibliographic instruction session. However, the repetition of knowledge and skills certainly can't hurt a student, and the one-on-one format of the term paper clinic keeps the student focused on the task at hand and helps to hone his / her searching skills.

Samuel Rothstein argues that in his article "Point of Need / Maximum Service: An Experiment in Library Instruction" that such repetition of instruction can only benefit the student; he sees the individual term paper clinic conference as much -needed supplement to traditional bibliographic instruction session. Rothstein observes

that "No doubt this [bibliographic] instruction would have been useful, but I thought that it did not go nearly far enough. The real 'need' - and therefore the point at which one would assuredly secure the students' attention - was to help *individual* students find information for their *individual* topics" (257). Students, therefore, see a real-world demonstration of their information needs, not just abstract examples of search techniques.

Defending the time and manpower needed to run a Term Paper Clinic, Rothstein states that:

My other reason for justifying and validating the approach used in the Term Paper Clinic is that nowadays many, many undergraduates really need this amount of help. Whether it is because of the (widely alleged) inadequate preparation in the high schools or because of the size and complexity of university libraries or because so many undergraduates are "disadvantaged" by virtue of language or socio-economic background, it is clear that the usual "mass," impersonal methods of library instruction will not work well enough (269 - 70).

The "nowadays" that Rothstein is referring to is 1975, almost 30 years ago. With the advent and proliferation of electronic databases coupled with increasing enrollments of students at colleges and universities (especially academically at-risk students), Rothstein's assertion about the need for personalized methods of reference instruction is perhaps more valid today than it was in 1975.

At WVU's term paper clinic, we have found that students do appreciate the added personalized attention they received. At the end of every semester, I send out a brief survey via email to past patrons of the clinic to determine what we are doing right and what suggestions for improvement they may have. Some comments we have received on past surveys include:

What I liked best from the term paper clinic its relaxed atmosphere [sic]. I got there one Tuesday 15 mins [sic] before it closed. The person at the clinic didn't rush it or give me half answers. PS...I got an A on the paper I took to the clinic and I attribute part of that A to getting the citation correct. Awesome!

I was able to voice what I needed to do and settle on my topic with a qualified researcher.

She was not only willing to give me her own ideas but also how to put both our thoughts together to create the perfect paper.

While libraries have pushed, rightfully so, for more digital collections and more online access, it's important not to overlook interpersonal ways we can improve service to our patrons. Students love the online access the library can give them, enabling them to do research any where and any time they have Internet access, but they

also like having a human being to guide them through the finer points of this potentially confusing writing and researching process.

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