

# Forum: Writing centers and tutoring in Japan and Asia

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## Forum participants

### Moderator and organizers

- Steve Cornwell *Osaka Jogakuin College*
- Scott Johnston *Osaka Jogakuin College*
- Hiroko Yoshida (Moderator) *Osaka University of Economics*

### Writing center coordinators

- Scott Johnston *Osaka Jogakuin College*
- Yuzu Uchida *Waseda University*
- Deborah McDowell Aoki *Hokusei Gakuin University*
- Jennie Roloff *Teachers College; Kanda University of International Studies*
- Ashok Dange *Smt. Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science, India*

### Tutors

- Robert Moreau *Teachers College*
- Kyoko Morikoshi *Hokusei Gakuin University*
- Jennie Roloff *Kanda University of International Studies*
- Yuto Koizumi *Waseda University*
- Shoko Nagata *Waseda University*
- Ayako Saito *Waseda University*
- Sachiko Shiota *Waseda University*

### Reference data:

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This paper describes the forum on writing centers and tutoring in Japan and Asia held at JALT2009. It first provides a brief to each center based on the centers' coordinators' presentations. It then summarizes the panel discussions held by the coordinators and, finally, it provides a synopsis of the panel discussion held by the tutors. Writing center funding, tutors, and session length and formats are among the topics addressed.

本稿は、JALT2009において開催された日本とアジアにおけるライティングセンターとチュータリングに関するフォーラムの概要を報告する。初めに、各センターのコーディネータによって説明されたライティングセンターの特徴を紹介し、次に、コーディネータ及びチューターによるパネルディスカッションについて論じる。主に議論された内容は、ライティングセンターの運営資金、チューター、セッション時間の長さ、セッションの構成などである。

**A**LTHOUGH UNIVERSITY writing centers have a long history in U.S. universities, they are a relatively new phenomenon in Japan and Asia. Writing centers started being established in Japan around 2004, yet only a few articles have been published to date. They include ones on their establishment, effectiveness, and the role of literacy (Johnston, 2006; Johnston, Cornwell, & Yoshida, 2008; Johnston & Swenson, 2005; Sadoshima, 2006; Yasuda, 2006). Furthermore, in the past three years, interest in writing centers in Japan has been growing as represented by numerous presentations and symposiums at various conferences (JACET, JALT) on the development of writing centers and the development of an Asian writing/learning center list serve (asianwritingcenters-subscribe@yahoo.com). All this activity culminated with the first annual Japan writing center symposium being held in February 2009 at the University of Tokyo's Komaba campus. At this symposium writing center coordinators and tutors were able to discuss and compare their writing centers and approaches to tutoring. A second symposium was held in February, 2010 at Waseda University. It was at the first symposium that the idea of holding a larger forum at JALT was first discussed.

For the forum, it was decided to not limit participants to Japan but to include writing centers in Asia. The organizers of

the forum have been conducting research into writing centers as part of a Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Kaken grant and had made contacts and visited writing centers in Korea, Singapore, and the U.S as well as in Japan. Originally, South Korea and India had coordinators who were interested in participating. However, the coordinators from two South Korean universities' writing centers could not attend.

The format of the forum was as follows. The session began by introducing the Kaken research that was responsible for first making connections between the various writing centers present. It then continued with a brief presentation on writing centers in general. Next, the writing center coordinators invited presented brief summaries of their centers. (Note: summaries were also presented on the two South Korean centers whose coordinators were not able to attend). Finally, there were two panel discussions followed by questions and answers: a 35-minute panel discussion of coordinators and a 20-minute panel discussion of tutors. Tutors refers to the people actually staffing the center, and depending on the center, can include teachers, graduate students, or advanced undergraduate students.

This article loosely follows the format of the forum described in the preceding paragraph as it presents information on the writing centers that participated, and summarizes the panel discussions of the writing center coordinators and the writing center tutors.

### Writing centers

The following are synopses of the summaries each writing center coordinator presented highlighting the key points they made. The synopses are followed by information on how the centers are funded, what services they offer, and how they operate.

- **School:** Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC)
- **Administrator:** Scott Johnston <johnston@wilmina.ac.jp>

- **College homepage:** [www.wilmina.ac.jp/ojc/top/view?set\\_language=en](http://www.wilmina.ac.jp/ojc/top/view?set_language=en)
- **Writing center homepage:** [www.wilmina.ac.jp/studylink/Writing\\_Center/index.htm](http://www.wilmina.ac.jp/studylink/Writing_Center/index.htm)

OJC is a liberal arts college with about 1,000 students. Students in the 4-year college major in International & English Interdisciplinary Studies and students in the 2-year college major in English. OJC is one of the few universities in Japan where most of the courses are taught through English and students have many writing assignments including essays, summaries, and research papers. The 6-day writing center was established in April 2004 when the 4-year university was established. Prior to that there was a one evening a week "writing center." The writing center is part of the Self-Access & Study Support Center (SASSC) which in addition to writing support includes Japanese tutors who can address a wide range of issues in Japanese, a Grammar Clinic, and a Phonetics Clinic.

- **School:** Waseda University
- **Administrator:** Saori Sadoshima <[sadoshima@waseda.jp](mailto:sadoshima@waseda.jp)>
- **University homepage:** [www.waseda.jp/top/index-e.htm](http://www.waseda.jp/top/index-e.htm)
- **Writing center homepage:** [www.cie-waseda.jp/awp/](http://www.cie-waseda.jp/awp/)

Waseda University is one of the three largest private universities in Japan with around 57,000 students. At first the writing center served the 2,000 students in the School of International Liberal Studies. Many of the courses in this school are taught through English. The writing center was established when the School of International Liberal Studies began in 2004, and from October 2008 it has been open to the entire university. Waseda is one of the few writing centers that offers tutoring in English or Japanese. At the center you can work on a) an English paper with a native English speaking tutor, b) an English paper with a bilingual English/Japanese speaking tutor, c) a Japanese paper

with a Japanese speaking tutor, and d) a Japanese paper with a Japanese speaker specializing in Japanese as a Second Language (JSL).

- **School:** Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College, Hokkaido
- **Administrators:** Kyoko Morikoshi, Deborah Aoki <[morikoshi@hokusei.ac.jp](mailto:morikoshi@hokusei.ac.jp)>
- **College homepage:** [www.hokusei.ac.jp/english/index.cgi](http://www.hokusei.ac.jp/english/index.cgi)

Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College (HGUC) writing lab began in November 2005 with funding from a good practices grant. The center is located in the teaching material development room which belongs to the English department. The lab serves about 300 English majors. The English writing lab was needed to support students in writing better reports and papers for content-based classes such as Sociology, Anthropology, World Music, and History. However the lab was also established to facilitate any aspects of English learning including writing, presentations, interview preparation, etc. Some students come to the lab regularly to converse with tutors.

- **School:** Teachers College, Tokyo, Japan
- **Administrator:** Sandra Gillispie <[gillispie.sandra@gmail.com](mailto:gillispie.sandra@gmail.com)>
- **College homepage:** [www.tc-japan.edu/](http://www.tc-japan.edu/)
- **Writing center homepage:** [www.tc-japan.edu/writer/index.html](http://www.tc-japan.edu/writer/index.html)

Teachers College is a branch campus of Columbia University in New York City, NY. Currently, the writing center serves students studying for a master's degree in TESOL. Courses are only offered on Saturday and Sunday with students taking classes all day long. Thus, many students do not live in the Tokyo area.

Students take courses and then must carry out research and write a thesis of at least 25 pages that demonstrates they have mastered what they have been taught at Teachers College. The writing center serves both current students and alumni.

- **School:** Kanda University of International Studies
- **Administrators:** Jo Mynard, Phil Murphy <joanne-m@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>
- **University homepage:** [www.kuis.ac.jp](http://www.kuis.ac.jp)
- **Writing center homepage:** [www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/salc/links/salcwriting.html](http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/salc/links/salcwriting.html)

The Self Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies is one of the largest in Asia with over 10,000 resources in addition to a Writing Centre, a Practice Centre, a Free Conversation Area, and eight full-time learning advisors. The writing center serves over 3,000 undergraduate students at the university. Many of the courses in this university are taught through English. The writing center was established in 2004, and from 2009 there will be an online writing centre in addition to the physical one. The writing centre will assist students with anything written in English.

- **School:** Smt. Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science (SPCC), Goa, India affiliated with Goa University
- **Administrator:** Ashok Dange <add002@chowgules.ac.in>
- **College homepage:** [www.chowgules.ac.jp](http://www.chowgules.ac.jp) <writingcentre@chowgules.ac.in>

Smt Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science (SPCC) is an undergraduate degree college offering degrees in arts and sciences. In addition there is a masters programme in Geography and Computer Science. Furthermore, the college includes students pursuing their Higher Secondary Certificate Exam

(11th and 12th year of schooling). The total student population is about 1500. The writing centre is part of the Counseling, Career, and Vocational Guidance Centre, which was started in 2007. The writing centre was started with assistance from the University of Ottawa, Canada. Marie-Lise Blain, the manager of the Academic Writing Help Centre in Ottawa and the Coordinator of the Centre, Martin Hollock, helped develop the SPCC center during a stay from June 30th to July 22nd, 2008. Prior to college, students learn through their mother tongue which is Konkani, Marathi, and/or Hindi. The language of instruction in the college is English.

In the brief presentations by the coordinators, they presented information on several topics concerning their individual sessions and organization/operation (See Tables 1 and 2). These topics are viewed as central to tutoring as well as to the organization of centers.

As can be seen from Table 1, the organization of these centers varies. Some are open 6 days a week while others (Teacher College) are open only on the weekend. Sessions run from 15 minutes to an hour. In discussions about session length, schools were trying to balance serving the most students with limited staffing. Several schools would have liked to offer longer sessions but could not due to funding. Those schools would allow students to sign up for a second session if no one was waiting. Almost all the centers allow students to receive assistance in English or informally in Japanese with one (Waseda) having set up its program to offer assistance in either language.

### Writing center coordinators' panel discussion

During the writing center coordinators' panel, a variety of topics and issues were discussed including those presented here: session length, tutors, funding, proofreading, successes, concerns, and suggestions for starting a center.

Table 1. Writing centers sessions

School	Hours	Length	Tutors	Session language
OJC	M-F 5:00-8:00 Sat 1:30-4:00	15 min.	Part-time instructors	Mostly in English for English
Waseda	M-F 10:40-5:15	45 min.	Trained graduate students	In English or Japanese
Hokusei	M-F 9:00-5:00	30 min.	Professional tutors	In English for English
Teachers College	Sat 1:00-5:00 Sun 12:00-5:00	60 min	3 alumni 3 TC students (graduate)	In English
Kanda University of Int. Studies	M-F 11:00-5:00	15 min	ELI instructors	Mostly in English but also Japanese
SPCC	M-Sat. 8:30-3:30	45 min	Two full-time faculty; two part-time students	Mostly in English

Table 2. Writing centers' organization/operation

School	Funding	Administration	Services	Students usage
OJC	Yearly (about ¥1 million/year)	Faculty member	Writing, speaking, reading, grammar	Spring 2009: 494
Waseda	Tutors paid by university; budget from Center of International Education	Faculty member with some release time	Writing	Spring 2009: 920
Hokusei	Grants ¥2 million/ year	Two faculty	Writing, speaking, reading, grammar, general English questions	Spring 2009: 459
Teachers College	Students pay; ¥3,000 for a one hour private session	Faculty member	Writing support with focus on MA thesis project and other publications	N/A
Kanda University	N/A	Faculty member	Writing support	N/A
SPCC	N/A	Student assistant and full-time coordinator	All types of writing, including job applications, resumes, etc.	As of Oct. 2009: 141

### **Session length**

The session length varied for the centers from 15 minutes to one hour. The rationales for setting session length varied and were dependent upon course scheduling, funding, and the purposes of the centers.

At some schools, such as Waseda, classes are 90 minutes long and the tutors are graduate students. Thus, it is easy to schedule tutors for a 45-minute session or two sessions in 90 minutes. OJC limits its sessions to 15 minutes in order to reach more students. This is also influenced by the fact that the center is only open 3 hours per night as the college does not have funds to open it longer. Thus, it is possible for 12 students to get help per evening. As mentioned earlier, if there is no one signed up for the next slot, a student can stay for 30 minutes. Teachers College had a tutor that worked in a writing center in the U.S. where the sessions were 60 minutes; thus, TC set their sessions at 60 minutes as well. And, since they are working on a higher level of academic writing (MA theses), more time is necessary.

While the coordinators agreed that the focus of writing centers is to develop better writers and not necessarily create better papers, there were various opinions on length of sessions. In longer sessions, there is more time for the student to think about her/his writing and to examine several sections of a paper. On the other hand, in the shorter sessions, students must focus on some aspect of their writing and paper to discuss as there is not enough time to go through the paper from introduction to conclusion.

### **Tutors**

The types of tutors used varied too. At Waseda, they used graduate students who are thoroughly trained in an in-house training program and who meet regularly to discuss tutoring and issues that come up in the course of tutoring. Other uni-

versities in Japan also use graduate students, for example, The University of Tokyo and Sophia University.

On the other hand, OJC uses part-time instructors most of whom also teach at OJC. These tutors have an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and students' problems. Similarly, Hokusei Gakuin University uses native speaking English professional tutors. Kanda University of International Studies is able to use faculty as tutors as does SPCC in Goa.

### **Funding**

Many of the Japanese universities have received grants from the government to help start their writing centers. These grants were often in the form of a Distinctive University Education Support Program grant, commonly known as a Good Practices grant. Good practices grants are Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology grants given to "support distinctive and outstanding projects [that] contribute to the improvement of university education..." (MEXT, 2003). Waseda, OJC, Sophia, and Hokusei Gakuin College all received government funding to help set up or run their writing centers. On the other hand, Teachers College has students pay, which is how some U.S. university writing centers are organized.

### **Proofreading**

In general, the writing centers do not proofread students' papers. Even Hanyang University in Seoul which serves only graduate students and faculty who are seeking to publish papers in academic journals and which offers session that can run several hours does not proofread. Proofreading can be done by outside organizations. One coordinator also pointed out that although students may ask for a grammar check or proofreading, they often really want some other kind of help. They just do not know what specific help to ask for or how to ask for it.

At OJC, if students come in for a grammar check, which is common, the tutors do not check the grammar but instead will look for patterns, such as students using wrong forms of a word (marriage versus married). Then they point out a couple of cases to the students so that they can begin to correct their own papers.

### Successes

Successes were often phrased in terms of the number of students who visit and the learning that takes place. The centers are challenged to get more students to visit the centers. Their experience is that students who visit once are more likely to return, so effort is made to get more students to make that initial visit. Centers try a variety of marketing approaches ranging from having professionally designed posters placed strategically around campus to having tutors visit writing classes to introduce the center and encourage students to visit.

Another success several people mentioned is seeing learning take place. Several of the coordinators also serve as tutors, and they lit up and became more animated when they talked about seeing students' understanding occur right in front of them.

### Concerns

As is expected, the coordinator's also raised some concerns they have. One concern is how to get the students who need help to come to the centers. Various suggestions were presented. Seoul National University requires all first-year students to visit the center and at Tokyo University the center (and required visits) are an integral part of certain writing classes. In addition some instructors at schools give extra credit points for visiting. At OJC, the writing center tutors visit the first-year classes to put a personal face to the writing center. At this time, they also hand out a list of helpful language in Japanese and English that

students can use to ask questions when they visit. As mentioned earlier, some schools use posters to advertise their center, but the general feeling of the coordinators was that using signs alone was not very effective.

Another concern had to do with conflicting views about the appropriate role of a writing center. Some faculty members want their school's writing center to proofread the students' papers before the instructor sees them. In other words, they wanted the center to be proofreading and remedial centers. It seems no matter how much centers indicate that writing centers are not for proofreading, some instructors continue to send students for proofreading. Other faculty members question whether or not using a writing center is fair. They feel that students who visit the writing center have an unfair advantage over students who do not visit. A question about this was asked at the end of the forum. The coordinators indicated that since the centers focus on the student's thinking about and understanding of the writing process, then a paper with a better grade most likely results from a student becoming a better writer. If that is so, then the centers are doing their jobs. One coordinator also pointed out that since all students have the opportunity to use the center, then centers are fundamentally fair and questions about fairness only serve to distract attention from real issues.

### Suggestions to consider when starting a center

There were several key suggestions made not as a step-by-step way to start a center, but rather as overall considerations that may help position one's department to advocate for a center. For information on how to start a center, readers should consult the International Writing Centers Association site (IWCA, 2006).

First, it is fine to start small and then grow. Many universities may think that a large center is needed from the beginning while others sometimes question the need for a writing center.

Both of these concerns can be addressed by starting with a small center, providing good advice to students, and monitoring students visits so that you are able to show how you are meeting their needs. Next, it is important that the decision makers at the university are taught the importance of a writing center and the needs it can fulfill. Many administrators are not familiar with writing centers and their purposes. Thus, it is necessary that they be educated as to the role these centers can play in English education within a university. Finally, it seems that many schools profited by having a government grant to help start the center. It is important to note that in many cases, the grant was not specifically for the establishment of a writing center, but rather for overall improvements, and thus the school was able to apply some of the grant to the writing center startup.

### **Tutors' panel discussion**

Following the writing center coordinators' panel discussion, a tutors' panel discussion was held where tutors who actually work with the students were able to provide some insight on who uses the centers, what a session looks like, and successes and concerns that tutors have.

### **Students who come**

The students who used the centers varied depending on the school. For example, OJC, SPCC and Hokusei mainly served the undergraduate students. On the other hand, Teachers College only has a graduate program. So its writing center users are graduate students and graduates of the program. Waseda University serves the whole campus. Undergraduates, graduate students and faculty can use its center. In addition, as mentioned earlier Waseda helps students with English or Japanese papers. Thus, they also help exchange students who are learning to write in Japanese as a second language.

### **Session format**

In most of the centers, the tutors started by asking the student's name and then asking questions to find out the purpose of the visit. Once the purpose of the visit is determined, the centers attempt to have the students and their papers remain central in the tutoring process with the tutor serving more as a facilitator rather than a teacher. Many centers have an evaluation form for students to fill out after the session, and most also have a form for the tutors to fill out in order to collect data on student usage. As mentioned earlier, this data can be helpful in showing administrators the need for the center.

### **Successes**

A key success parallels the one mentioned by the coordinators who spoke about seeing learning taking place. Tutors are able to see students develop confidence in their visits to the center. Students are often made to read their papers, and as they read they stop when they hear themselves read their own mistakes. They are often able to self-correct. In this way students are becoming critical readers of their own writing and thus, better writers. Another success is that tutors become better writing counselors. For example, one tutor highlighted how she became a more active listener and was then able to focus on students' concerns as she encourages them to write better. She moved from giving answers to asking probing questions.

Another tutor talked about how she and her students sometimes "jump for joy" at the end of a session when the student has truly found out how to make her/his writing better. The same tutor mentioned that she felt success when grammar was never mentioned during a session. She felt that when the conversations were connected to the organization of a paper and/or the ideas being expressed, she felt the student had realized what needs to be focused upon.



## Concerns

One of the main concerns that tutors mentioned was making sure the paper remains the student's own writing. The tutors were concerned that if they are too direct in providing support, the paper may "become" the tutor's paper. So a question they are constantly dealing with is how much direct support is acceptable?

In addition, students are often primarily worried about words and grammar and not organization and ideas. Thus, tutors need to balance addressing the students' needs while also having the student consider the larger picture which includes the organization of their writing and the message they are trying to get across.

Another concern was that the centers became very busy at the end of semesters as assignments become due and not all the students who want to meet with a tutor can schedule an appointment. Some schools try to address this by adding tutors or asking faculty members to volunteer for a few hours.

Finally, the use of online translators was mentioned as a growing concern. Some students will write an essay in Japanese, put it through an online translator and bring the results to a session without even looking at it. The result is a paper that is often almost incomprehensible. The student often does not even know many of the words in the paper and is unable to explain what certain sentences mean. The tutors felt this will be a growing problem in the future.

## Conclusion

This forum helped show that there seems to be a common conceptual idea for writing centers at Japanese universities. All are committed to not just helping students produce a better paper, but to support student learning. They are also concerned with students remaining autonomous and maintaining ownership of their papers. At the same time the centers are organized

to fit the unique needs of their schools and students, and this has led to diversity among the centers. As has been seen in this paper, there is diversity in terms of the students served, session lengths, and types of tutors to mention just a few areas.

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## Invitation

Anyone interested in joining the Asian Writing/Learning Centers online group, please email: <asianwritingcenters-subscribe@yahoo.com>

## Bio data

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tional Training, USA and an EdD in Curriculum, Instruction and Technology in Education from Temple University, USA. His research areas of interest are curriculum design, learners' identity and investment in learning English, and teacher education.

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