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Perspectives on Undergraduate
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Deconstructing Authority for Truly Collaborative Mentorship in Undergraduate Creative Writing

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The mentor-workshop model of creative writing instruction, most famously pioneered by the Iowa Writer's Workshop founded in 1936, has long dominated higher education creative writing classrooms (Bishop, 1988). Paul Engle, in an anthology celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Iowa Workshop, describes the goals of the mentor-workshop method as, "to have your work read by all the members of the Workshop, and publicly criticized and praised by your instructors in the weekly meetings" (as cited in Bishop, 1988, p. 89). In the intervening 83 years, very little has changed in creative writing classrooms where the professor, often a "star" writer with perhaps little training or interest in pedagogy, leads a small group of students in critique of their peers' work. Perhaps for just as long, scholars of creative writing pedagogy have been critiquing this model. Indeed, in her article, "Teaching Undergraduate Creative Writing: Myths, Mentors, and Metaphors," Bishop (1988) levels three such critiques against the mentor-workshop model in stark terms, asserting that the model is "elitist, often sexist, and falsely collaborative" (p. 87).

In this paper, we, one creative writing faculty mentor and two mentees, will assess our own experience of mentorship through Bishop's lens. We believe that we may have a model that addresses these problems, particularly that of the claim of "false" collaboration.

The Persistence of Bishop's Critiques: A Review of the Literature

In reviewing the literature on teaching writing and mentorship, we found that the mentor-workshop model has persisted as an elitist, sexist, and falsely collaborative pedagogy long after Bishop first leveled those critiques in 1988.

Bishop (1988) acknowledges that elitism is in some ways an inherent limitation of mentoring, since "mentors can only work with the few, not with the many" and that, "mentors are looking for the best students" (p. 87). Indeed, some of the most valuable aspects of mentorship arise from the fact that it facilitates one-on-one work and relationship building between students and faculty. However, faculty and institutions must be mindful of who comprises "the few" who are selected for mentorship opportunities. Underrepresented students may face a variety of barriers to mentorship opportunities, when, in fact, such students may benefit the most from mentoring. Indeed, mentoring itself may be a powerful antidote to a lack of access since mentors provide a "form of access to the inside story" or insider's knowledge of the academy (Chan, 2008, p. 276). The mentor-workshop model of creative writing instruction may itself be a barrier to underrepresented students who wish to study the craft.

Similarly, Bishop (1988) lays bare the “patriarchal and often times sexist roots” of the mentor-workshop model (p. 88). She again quotes Engle, who described family life at the University of Iowa thusly, “While the husband and father kept his typewriter smoking with one hand and heated the pabulum with the other, his family has stoically endured the fate of living with a writing man” (as cited in Bishop, 1988, p. 88). While initiatives like the VIDA Count by VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, show the steady, if not painstakingly slow progress of women in the traditionally male-dominated field of creative writing, creative writing instruction and mentorship still operate on patriarchal logic. For instance, in a study of the metaphors that teachers used to describe teaching writing (though, to be fair, not creative writing specifically), Schwartz and Williams (1995) uncovered a host of metaphors with binary and asymmetrical power dynamics. They note that the “college instructor enjoys a considerable amount of power over the student...this power appears in the metaphor of the teacher as philosopher-king” (p. 108). Further, they note that their study uncovered metaphors for good writing that are “traditionally associated with masculinity” (Schwartz & Williams, 1995, p. 109). Indeed, in *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Curriculum*, Adist (2017) traces the roots of creative writing pedagogy to other forms of oppression. She argues that creative writing pedagogy is racist in its insistence on upholding white language supremacy, classist in the way it assumes that writing belongs to a leisured class with an art-for-art’s sake intention for the work. She states, “While the workshop is often thought of as a form of student-centered pedagogy, it turns out that workshop conversations serve to marginalize a range of aesthetic orientations and cultural histories to which they belong” (p. 67). In order for creative writing to be a truly inclusive discipline, it seems necessary to rethink the power structures that underlie the many assumptions about who writers are and how and why they write.

Finally, Bishop’s (1988) claim that the mentor-workshop model is falsely collaborative is rooted in the way the model encourages imitation. She notes that imitation, as a pedagogical tool, can be useful, but that it can also be problematic when a mentor passes on practices and habits not worthy of imitation. Indeed, Ritter and Vanderslice (2005) pick up that critique, noting that, by failing to “complicate or interrogate” traditions of creative writing pedagogy, the field “perpetuate[s] the model of the creative writing teacher as a mentor or idol whom younger writers should copy” (p. 108). Imitation as a mentoring practice also raises the question of what, exactly, is being imitated. Peckham analyzes the kind of “mimesis” that D.G. Myers describes having received from his mentor, Raymond Carver, in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Myers notes that Carver did not teach any kind of literary technique, “but rather embodied the practice of writing in his own life” (as cited in Peckham, 2019, p. 97).

The idea that creative writing mentors instruct students not only on writing, but also on the writing lifestyle, points to further complications of any potential collaboration, since the mentor is often playing the role of instructor, friend, and evaluator, and the mentor is often required to grade their mentees. Peckham (2019) notes that, “This relationship, though wonderful in many ways, creates tension when it comes time for the mentor to assign a grade to the student’s work” (p. 96). Of course, there are many scholars who have critiqued grading beyond the pressure it puts on the student-mentor relationship and as a system antithetical to learning, particularly in writing and literacy classes. Elbow (2012) points to three major problems in writing assessments: 1) the unrealistic striving for a numerical representation of a multifaceted text, 2) the lack of objectivity, and 3) the inability to judge a skill based on just one single text. Inoue (2015) picks up this critique, and also considers the way students are affected by grades. He notes that, “the focus on grades...alienates students from the real products of their labor. The surrogate product of grades substitutes a student’s purposes, swapping out the goal of laboring to learn (about their writing and reading practices) for laboring to earn (a grade)” (p. 193). Furthermore, he identifies grading, and assessments of writing more broadly, as a component of a classroom “ecology” that does harm to students of color and those with language differences. Perhaps Stommel (2017) provides the most

succinct and comprehensive takedown of grades with his blog post, “Why I Don’t Grade,” in which he enumerates the many ways that grades degrade the learning environment. He states, “Grades (and institutional rankings) are currency for a capitalist system that reduces teaching and learning to a mere transaction. Grading is a massive coordinated effort to take humans out of the educational process.” When it comes to mentorship, Hedengren (2016) sums up the tension succinctly, saying, “Mentor-models must somehow influence their protégés without dominating them, improve them without controlling them” (p. 201).

Background: The College of Creative Studies Paradox – Elitism without Grades

While we hope to ultimately offer a model of mentorship that leads to a truer form of collaboration by breaking down some of Bishop’s critiques, we must first acknowledge that we very much still operate within the context of elitism. The mentorship described in this article took place in the Writing & Literature curriculum in The College of Creative Studies (CCS), the smallest of the three undergraduate colleges at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Founded in 1967 by Professor of English Marvin Mudrick to facilitate and encourage students to produce original works in the arts, humanities, and sciences, the college has gained a reputation over its 50+ years of producing exceptionally talented and successful students. Today, the college offers nine majors (Art, Biology, Biochemistry, Chemistry, Computing, Mathematics, Music Composition, Physics, and Writing & Literature) to its approximately 400 students. These students are chosen on the basis of a supplemental application to the College based on evidence of talent or achievement in their subject areas. As such, the College itself creates an environment of an elite chosen “few” within the larger university. And, indeed, the College has faced difficulties in achieving the same levels of diversity as the rest of the UCSB campus, a Hispanic-serving institution with a large proportion of first-generation students. And, of course, these students represent “the few” being mentored by this faculty member.

However, it is also the philosophy of this “elite” institution that made it possible for us to tackle the inherent sexism and false collaboration of typical creative writing mentorship. First, mentorship itself is embedded in the CCS experience. All students in CCS are paired with a faculty advisor with whom they must meet once per quarter. In large part, this faculty advisor helps students choose courses to match their interests. However, the role of the CCS faculty advisor often extends far beyond just choosing courses. The faculty advisor, more broadly, is often the student’s mentor. That might mean that the faculty advisor actively introduces students to opportunities on and off campus that they might not be aware of, such as funding opportunities, conferences, workshops, events, or publishing opportunities. Often, the mentoring that faculty advisors perform is of the

more hands-on variety. In the STEM disciplines in the College, faculty advisor/mentors often supervise students in their labs, consult with students on their own research, and co-author scientific papers for publication. On the arts side of the College, students receive one-on-one tutorial instruction and individualized feedback on their creative work.

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Perhaps most importantly, classes in CCS are not letter-graded. Instead, students earn units (i.e., credits) based on the amount of labor they put into a course. This grading system is intended to encourage students to take risks and embrace failure as a part of learning (since failing to earn more units is not a penalty in the same way as a failing grade).

In this paper, we will provide a dialogue on the mentorship we experienced in the Writing & Literature (W&L) major in the College of

Creative Studies. During the junior year of the major, students must complete Junior Tutorial, a type of independent study that allows students to work one-on-one or in very small groups with a faculty mentor on their creative and scholarly work. Our experience as students and faculty suggest that our model of mentorship may provide a more truly collaborative environment for undergraduate creative writers by deconstructing the authority of the mentor through working together as peers and not using letter grades.

The Mentor, The Mentees, and Prior Experiences

Meet the Mentor: Kara Mae Brown

During academic year 2018-2019, I have been mentoring two juniors in the Writing & Literature major, Kailyn Kausen and Komal Surani. I have served (and continue to serve) as the academic advisor for these students since their first quarter of college and have taught them as students in several of my classes, including the First-Year and Sophomore Seminars and Introduction to Writing Studies class required for the major. Notably, I collaborated closely with these students in different ways before becoming their Junior Tutorial mentor. For instance, Kailyn served as the Editor-in-Chief for our college's literary journal, for which I was the faculty mentor, and Komal and I bonded over our shared love of television and personal essays and her frequent pop-ins to office hours when she took a few of my elective classes.

Needless to say, by the time these students were juniors and ready to enroll in Junior Tutorial, I knew them well and had formed strong relationships with each of them. As we began planning our Tutorial sessions, which would center on weekly meetings where we would discuss the students' works-in-progress, Komal asked if I would be sharing my own works-in-progress with them. I had often considered this as a promising pedagogical move but had always ultimately decided that I wasn't comfortable taking time away from discussing student writing. This time around, because our Tutorial sessions would be small and because, frankly, I had not yet found such beta-readers on our campus, I decided to try it out. Currently, I am working on a novel tentatively called *What the Star Told Me*, which is based loosely on my parents' young lives as hippies living in the Midwest, working through grief over the loss of their brothers, and trying to navigate both their young love and the drug trade where they find work.

Meet the Mentees: Komal Surani

In our Junior Tutorial, I am working on a television pilot. The show is about the Greek Gods being forced from Mount Olympus onto Earth. They have to learn how to live like normal human beings as they lose their powers and become increasingly more human. Manifestations of their humanity come in different ways. One of the Gods gets cancer, while another gets pregnant, etc. They also face a divide among themselves. Of seven gods, three want to go and reclaim their home, three want to stay and live human lives, and one can't decide.

I am also working on a research project on Helen of Troy. Helen of Troy has been written about in every generation since she first appeared in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. She has been represented as many different things, but most commonly as a victim or a vixen. Using contemporary literature, television, and *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, I am examining her different identities to ask why, even in contemporary times, she is still always one or the other, never just a woman. My goal with this project is to show that if writers are still representing women in this way even now, then ideas of representation must not be moving forward.

Meet the Mentees: Kailyn Kausen

In our Junior Tutorial, I am writing a dystopian novel about a character named James, who thinks that he doesn't need anyone to get by in life. In the world I'm building, there's a high incarceration rate, huge division of wealth, and even more vulgar fun. James thinks he will have the chance to

experience wealth, but then it is ripped out of his hands before he can cash into the high life, ending up in prison with the people he pushed down for that chance. He's got such a different perspective on life from myself that I love writing him.

Previous Experience with the Mentor-Workshop Model: Komal Surani

My first college writing class was Introduction to Creative Writing, a requirement for the Writing & Literature major and an example of the traditional workshop class. While it was nice to get to know the other Writing & Literature majors, it quickly became clear that none of the students had ever learned how to seriously critique writing before. In the workshop, work was read anonymously, and the other students would issue a barrage of compliments with some rare helpful criticism in between. The professor usually did not comment himself, until the students stopped commenting entirely, forcing the professor to give the sole feedback in the whole class. He never taught us how to give proper criticism, so he inevitably set himself up as the head of the class. As the only one of us who knew how to critique, his feedback then became that much more invaluable. All other opinions or perspectives were neglected.

This class was essentially the blueprint for all other workshop classes I took. They were not all bad. Some professors did take the time to teach us how to critique, but more often than not, they fell into the “head of the class” role. Professors would never suggest that their feedback was more valuable, but because of the way they led the discussion, students never understood whether the professors wanted them to actually critique or just to regurgitate the professor's own opinions. Grades were also a factor because there would be pressure to listen to the professor—the person who could control how well you did.

Previous Experience with the Mentor-Workshop Model: Kailyn Kausen

My experience with workshopping was similar to Komal's. But something different I found was that the professors sometimes wouldn't say anything at all. We'd go in, read the pieces, and often the conversation would devolve into praise of the funny or provocative pieces and no comments for anything else. The professor would wait until the students were done speaking, then tell a story about something kind of connected to the content of the story, rarely commenting on the work of the students. I noticed that, over time, the characters, scenes, and stories people brought in tried to fill that humorous, outrageous tone that students responded to. This was not false collaboration with the mentor, but false collaboration with the most vocal students in the class. These students weren't responding to the quality of the writing but rather the shock value of the content.

In that workshop, I began working on the project I am continuing in my Junior Tutorial. I thought it was amazing because of the reaction I got from students in the workshop. I didn't realize until I read it later that the “Well they think it is good” from the professor was him noting there were elements in my work that needed to be improved. With Junior Tutorial, the close attention Komal, Kara Mae, and I give to my work allows us to overlook the shock value of my character's antics and focus on the story. Junior Tutorial allows us to see more than just the content of the story, which is often what is critiqued in workshops. With the Junior Tutorial, I am able to see that James, the protagonist of my novel-in-progress, is a strong character, but my worldbuilding and the movement of my characters need direction. When I brought in my first chapter, the phrases, “What is happening here?” and “What does this look like?” appeared several times on my draft. Now, I am able to do something with these comments and gain confidence in other parts of my novel other than just the character.

Reflections on Mentee Experiences

Imitation and Collaboration in the Mentoring Process: Komal Surani

When Kara Mae started sharing her work, the structure of our group completely changed. Prior to our mentorship, I already had relationships with Kara Mae and Kailyn, one as my advisor and the other

as my friend. Coming into a group with them was not as daunting as it would have been if they were strangers. Having a relationship with Kara Mae was especially helpful because I already had an idea of the way she gave feedback. She gave it bluntly. I knew that I wanted a mentor who would give me criticism without hesitation, because that was the only way to get better. As time progressed, my relationships with the two women became stronger, allowing me to give them better and more centered feedback. The more they understood where I'm coming from, why I'm writing what I'm writing, and what I want to say, the better the feedback became, and vice versa.

Kara Mae's choice to share her own work positioned us as three women writers who just happened to be working together. We moved beyond being just mentee and mentor; we became something in between mentee-mentor and friends. I became more comfortable telling them how I felt about their writing and more confident telling them what I thought could be better. With Kara Mae, especially, I was nervous to critique her work because she has so much more experience than me. But because of our easy rapport, I was able to more easily give her feedback. Because I became comfortable in our group, I spent more time thinking about the writing itself—both theirs and mine—without having the pressure of giving the “right” feedback.

In fact, in our group, there was nothing “right”. Without the pressure of grades, I never felt pressured to imitate Kara Mae, though I definitely look up to her because she has a lot more experience than I do. One thing I take away from her is her attitude towards writing. She does not become overly attached to her work, which better helps her to accept feedback. I already try to detach myself from my work, and I have become even more comfortable with cutting and changing my work, essentially learning to “kill my darlings.” For example, when I first started writing my pilot about the Greek Gods, it had thirteen characters and a central conflict that involved the world breaking apart. In brief, it was not my best work. When I brought it in to Kara Mae, she suggested that I got rid of eight of the characters and axed the central conflict entirely. I chose to do the latter but axed only five of the characters. What I've learned from working with her and Kailyn is the line between the feedback I need to take and the feedback I need to leave behind. The value in receiving critique is that it gives you other people's opinions and experience. This group allows me to pick and choose what is the best for my story, not for my grade. The safe space we have created here allows me to learn from both of these women, while still keeping my own voice.



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Imitation and Collaboration in the Mentoring Process: Kailyn Kausen

I never felt the expectation to imitate my mentor, Kara Mae. In part, I think this is because of how we begin the Junior Tutorial process. Before we choose a mentor, we present the project we want to do to members of the Writing & Literature faculty for approval. That means that even before the Junior Tutorial begins, I'm setting my own goals. I knew I wanted to work on this novel. I had already started. I had a plan. That's also how we plan our Junior Tutorial work each quarter. We decide what we want to do based off what I want. Kara Mae asks, “What do you want to read?” and “Do you think this would be better for you or this?” rather than saying, “This is what we're doing.” For me to have a choice in what I learn, grading based on the amount of work put into a project rather than by letter grade is likely necessary. It would be much harder from a mentor's perspective to know how to assign a letter grade to different types of writing and research in comparison to work done by other mentees. Thus, having to assign a letter grade might be a barrier to mentors asking students what

they want to learn.

I was intimidated when Komal and I agreed to let Kara Mae share her work along with ours because I was afraid that I wouldn't have any good comments for her. Now I think that was the most important collaborative aspect of this mentorship. I could see from one week to the next how she chose to implement my comments about her work into another draft. Seeing Kara Mae reject comments Komal or I made but also get excited about the value of comments or a perspective she did not see before, caused me to understand that Kara Mae appreciated our comments, yet still had agency to listen to comments that aligned with her vision of her story. This reaffirmed for me that, even as someone gives great comments, not all of them need to be followed if I don't think it will make my story better or leads my story down a path that I don't want it to go. I have always struggled with revising but watching my mentor revise after I gave her comments allowed me to understand what the revision process is like. If I had to say things that I imitate, I would say I have taken my mentor's method of revision, which is a process, not a style.

Conclusions

A Mentee's Perspective: Kailyn Kausen

In addition to working collaboratively on our creative work, we also worked together on this academic paper. In most college classes, the professors already expect you to know what to do when it comes to research papers. Working together on this research paper was a different type of writing and collaboration than I was used to. Middle and high schools teach you five-paragraph Step Up to Writing and then after that—nothing. In college, I never really worked off a structure. But working on this research together and seeing how Kara Mae researched and organized thoughts made the process easier and the paper stronger. When I've done research before, I compiled quotations and threw them in any way I could to meet the requirement because I didn't know how else to do it. This collaboration was different. Writing is normally independent and only when you are ready, do others comment on it. This paper was a collaboration of ideas from day one, even bringing together different research materials we found. We'd discuss, bounce ideas off one another, and bring them together into something cohesive. We felt like equals in the process. For instance, Kara Mae had to cut two thirds of her original ideas for this paper due to the two sections Komal and I settled on about our previous workshop experience and imitation.

A Mentee's Perspective: Komal Surani

Writing this article is like an experiment in writing together, which is something we have never done before. We started out individually writing our own sections, and then we came together to meld those sections together. We had some of the same things to say and some very distinct things. Collaboration is not easy. It's not to just kill or save your own darlings, but also other people's. But it's worth it. The ideas we have come up with in this article are not ideas I would have come up with on my own. The different perspectives, like within creative writing mentorship, can only make the writing better. My key takeaway from this whole experience has been that it helps not only to work with other writers, but particularly with writers who have different experiences than you. Kara Mae may be my mentor, but she shares her work with me, which makes her something like my peer as well. It is not just that I am learning from her, but that we are learning together. That is real collaboration.

A Mentor's Perspective: Kara Mae Brown

Reading over my mentee's reflections on our work in Junior Tutorial leaves me with a couple of key takeaways as a mentor and more generally as a creative writing instructor. Perhaps what strikes me most is the importance of using one's own authentic voice. Of course, "finding one's voice" is a foundational goal of any creative writing instruction, however, what I see here is the need for students to find their voice not only as a writer, but as a critic. Both Komal and Kailyn noted that

once we were able to build trust in our relationships, they were able to use their more authentic voices in their feedback. They were able to put aside any pressure of impressing a professor or their peers, worrying about a grade, and instead spoke openly and honestly about our work. In short, we were able to get real. In our weekly meetings, we were just three women doing what we love: discussing and creating literature.

I was also surprised by the significance of my decision to share my own work with my mentees. While this decision was made, admittedly, with little forethought, it became clear almost immediately that it was a decision with great consequence. While Bishop specifically focused on the sexism embedded in the workshop-mentor model, sexism is just one iteration of the power structures that the workshop-mentor model has both arisen from and perpetuate. To address the sexism of the workshop-mentor model would mean fundamentally addressing the structures of power and authority in the model. Haake (2005) offers one view of authority in creative writing pedagogy. She says, “One possible role for authority in the creative writing classroom is to dismantle itself (p. 99).” In suggesting this, she seems interested in combatting the very kind of imitation that Bishop also critiques. Only by dismantling authority first might we offer students a way to “come into authentic writing of their own.” Haake ultimately offers a method for dismantling authority: “simply to teach what we do not know.”

When I offered up my own creative work for critique in our mentor group, I dismantled my own authority by offering up what for writers is the ultimate not-knowing. Despite how much craft knowledge or command of language a writer might have, the one thing that remains unknowable on our own is how to write our stories. This, of course, is why writers depend so completely on beta-readers. Indeed, during the writing process, readers often know more than writers about what a story needs. By introducing my own novel for critique, which was truly a problem I did not know how to solve, I created a space in which the mentees really got to be the authorities on my text. While a mentorship group between three women was not likely to have overt sexism, I believe that this inversion of the typical balance of power in a mentorship broke down some of the underlying structural oppression present in mentorship.

Without stepping into the process as a peer, I do not think we would have been able to overcome Bishop’s charge of “false collaboration.” Putting myself in the process as an equal went a long way in helping us build relationships. I remember the first meeting where we discussed my work and how truly inspired I was by the conversation we had about it. Komal and Kailyn helped me see my work in new and exciting ways and I couldn’t wait to get to my writer’s room to play with the feedback they had given me. They are too kind to say it here, but I’m sure that Komal and Kailyn learned from seeing me struggle – to find time to write, to figure out how my story works, and to stay motivated during a long project. However, what they both speak to clearly is that I was able to become a model of the writing process, which, despite my other flaws as a writer, I’ve certainly learned to trust. In fact, that may have been one of our most significant realizations – that rather than imitating style or even lifestyle, in creative writing mentorship, mentees need a process they can imitate and adapt to their own needs as writers.

The other significant factor in our ability to collaborate was the fact that there were no letter grades assigned to this work. Of course, not grading is another form of deconstructing authority, but is also a tool to encourage real collaboration.

Ironically, both participating in the workshop part of the mentorship process and not having to grade did in fact help me make more meaningful assessments of my mentees’ progress as writers. Having Komal and Kailyn give me feedback on my work also gave me valuable evidence of their learning. In our major, one of our Program Learning Goals is that majors should be able to work in a community

of writers. In this case, I saw and experienced that capability first-hand. I saw their ability to analyze work and give revision-based feedback, because I used their comments in my own revisions. They helped me make my writing better. I can think of no more important skill for young writers than being able to go out into the world and make their literary communities better.

We ultimately recommend that creative mentors should: 1) share their own creative work (e.g., writing, painting, music compositions, etc.) with their mentees and solicit feedback from them. 2) If possible, do not grade the work produced during the mentorship. While the first is relatively simple, the second could be more challenging. However, there is promising work on how grading contracts (Elbow, 2012; Inoue, 2015) can be used to produce grades based on fairer evaluations of labor, much like the variable units system in the College of Creative Studies, which might help instructors deconstruct the power dynamics of their mentorship in similar ways. I can also imagine this kind of mentorship taking place in quasi-co-curricular spaces, like a Writing Center or through student participation in faculty writing groups.

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