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## **Moving Online: Changing the Focus of a Writing Center**

Gene Thompson, Rikkyo University, Japan

### **Abstract**

This paper charts the development of a small departmental writing center at a university in Japan. The paper discusses the results from two semesters of an ongoing action research project focused on improving the usage of the center. Faced with significant constraints and decreasing usage, the project used student survey data collected at the end of each semester to drive developments to the center. This led to a shift from using a face-to-face peer model for the writing center, to organizing it as an online writing lab. The article demonstrates the potential benefits of moving online for centers facing significant constraints, and the importance of using data for decision making in driving center development.

*Keywords:* writing centre, Japanese university, action research

Writing centers at universities in Japan have struggled with defining their purpose (LaClare & Franz, 2013; McKinley, 2010) and attracting users (Johnston, Yoshida, & Cornwell, 2010). Although guidelines exist which outline a process for the development of centers (e.g, International Writing Centers Association, 2014), each center must respond to the context in which it will operate, by balancing institutional constraints such as budget and space, while attempting to meet differing student needs. As a result, there is considerable diversity in writing centers in Japan and the types of services they offer (Johnston et al., 2010).

This paper outlines the development of a departmental writing center within a business faculty at a private university in Japan, which supports the development of undergraduate students in a Bilingual Business management program. In the department of Global Business at Rikkyo University, students take academic and special purpose English courses in their first and second years, followed by business management content classes (taught in English) in their third and fourth years. As a result, the program requires students to complete academic essays, research papers, and business reports in English.

The paper will introduce and discuss changes to the writing center over two semesters made with the purpose of increasing student usage. It will begin by introducing the initial ‘physical’ writing center and issues that arose leading to the project. Next, the design of the (ongoing) action research project will be introduced, which involves changes being

implemented at the beginning of each semester, and the collection and analysis of student survey data at the end of each semester, which is used to inform future development. The first action cycle will be explained, and the survey data collected at the end of the first cycle will be presented. The paper will focus on how this data was used to reorganize the center from a physical space to an online lab. Next, student survey data generated following the second cycle will be introduced and analyzed, before outlining planned future changes and developments. The paper will conclude by discussing two implications which may be of value for educators working in writing centers in Japan: the value for students of easily accessible online materials and resources, and the value for administrators of ongoing data collection about the center.

### **The Initial Writing Center**

The ‘purpose’ of writing centers in Japan has been an issue widely discussed in the literature (Hays, 2010; Johnston, Cornwell & Yoshida, 2008; Johnston et al., 2010; LaClare & Franz, 2013; McKinley, 2010; Nakatake, 2013). Some centers have followed American ‘process’ models focused on writer and skills development (McKinley, 2010, 2011), while others have recognized the ‘product’ focus that users often have, and taken more pragmatic approaches in order to demonstrate ‘value’ to stakeholders (LaClare & Franz, 2013). Finally, differing needs have led to greater specialization and special programs within centers, such as the individualized support initiatives outlined by Nakatake (2013) for science students at a university in Tokyo.

McKinley (2011) asked “What is the mission of a writing center, and what services should it offer? Is it a remedial writing skills center? Is it a proofreading service? In Japan, is it simply English language assistance for non-native English users?” (p. 295). The initial design of the College of Business (COB) Writing Center followed a design commonly used in North American contexts, utilizing exchange students as peer tutors providing consultations to students about their writing. The stated purpose of the center mirrored the general consensus in Japan (see Johnston et al., 2010) that writing centers should help students to become better writers and not necessarily create better papers. Accordingly, peers were asked to work dialogically with students to improve their skills, rather than students’ texts per se, and information disseminated to students explained that “the Writing Center is not an editing service. It is a peer-run initiative to help you improve your writing ability. We ask questions and provide suggestions to help you help yourself” (COB Writing Center, 2011).

The operation of the service faced institutional constraints: limited budget, the lack of a dedicated space, and a small number of available exchange student peers. As a result, the center was open for approximately six hours per week, using a periodically available meeting room close to the departmental and instructors offices. Two peers were usually on duty in each time slot, and students could reserve ahead, or drop-in to speak with peers about their writing. A simple website provided basic information about the services of the center, but was not well known by students or integrated with other Learning Management Systems (LMS) used in the program.

### **Cycle One: The Action Research Project**

Similar to reports about writing centers in other contexts (e.g., McKinley, 2011), the center was initially well received when it was started in 2011, but over time was used less and less by students. Peers reported that students just wanted the grammar of their essays checked, a ‘purpose’ issue that has also been noted at centers in other studies (Johnston et al., 2010; McKinley, 2011). Furthermore, while some writing centers are housed inside a general self-access center (see Tan, 2011 for a review) and enjoy significant support from their institutions, the COB Writing Center was conceived of as a specialized service for departmental students, remaining a small operation administered by one of the instructors from the six-person Bilingual Business Leader (BBL) team. Reliant on a small allowance of (limited) departmental budget, the center struggled with room availability and attracting peer tutors. Finally, there was a 75% decline in student usage of the writing center service, from 66 sessions in the first semester of 2012 to only 17 in the second semester. This led to a discussion by the BBL team in April 2013 about the value of keeping the writing center open, and whether it justified the resources involved and effort required to manage the constraints it faced.

The decision was made to keep the center open, and the current research project was started to assess the situation and provide a structure for making changes to the organization of the center, in order to encourage greater use of the center and to assess the value of continuing the service. The design of the project followed a cyclical approach to problem solving, based on the Action Research Spiral (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001), where action cycles (corresponding to semesters) involved the planning and implementation of changes to the organization of the center, followed by the collection of student survey data to gauge the

efficacy of the developments for students. Qualitative and quantitative data were generated through the use of closed-ended and open-ended questions using online surveys. Data were analyzed quantitatively by calculating percentages for closed-ended responses, while open-ended responses were coded and grouped into themes. The survey results were then presented to the team for discussion, where decisions about developments and changes were then made for implementation in the following semester.

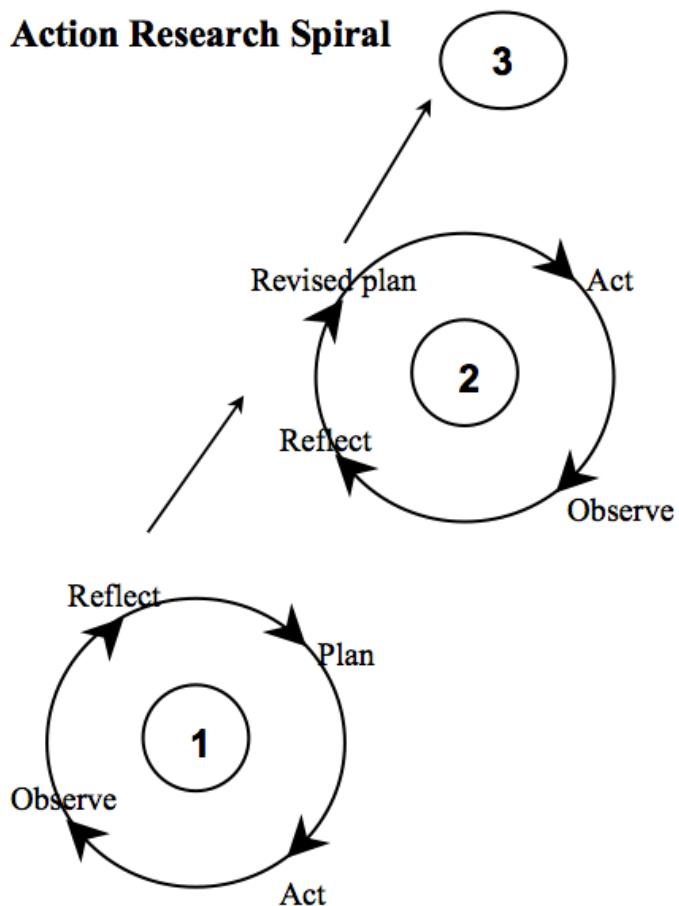


Figure 1. The Action Research Spiral (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001)

A number of actions were considered for introduction in the first cycle. Anecdotal feedback from peer tutors suggested that the ‘drop-in’ organization of the center led to situations where students had attempted to visit the center but the peers had been unable to look at the student’s writing (a problem noted by Johnson et al., 2010). Extensive discussion also focused on feedback from peer tutors that students often had relatively straightforward questions. As a result, the teaching team decided upon two actions to be implemented in the

first semester of 2013, to improve the writing center service: (1) an online reservation system was introduced to prevent situations where students dropped-in to the center but could not have their writing seen; and (2) the creation of an expanded online resource center where students could access materials to help with their writing without needed to visit the center or meet with a peer tutor.

Both actions were examples of recent developments for writing centers internationally, where “writing support systems have gone online to disseminate information about the physical centers, or to provide downloadable writing references” (Tan, 2011, p. 393). The decision to implement a reservations system may seem strange since the center had a problem of low usage, and that by introducing such a system there would be a further step required of students wishing to visit the center. However, tutors reported that during weeks where writing assignments were due the number of students visiting the center increased to a point where they sometimes could not see all students. Accordingly, it was hoped that a reservation system would help avoid such situations.

The decision to expand the website to an online ‘lab’ was made in response to five problems the teaching team considered based on anecdotal peer and student feedback: (1) students did not have sufficient time in their schedules to visit the center; (2) the location of the center was inconvenient to students (did not want to cross campus and come to the departmental floor of the building); (3) students were leaving their writing to the last minute, thus making a visit to the center of little instrumental value for improving their writing; (4) the center could not respond to the spikes in demand when assignments were due (and resulted in no visitors at other times); and (5) students sometimes had relatively straightforward concerns that they did not judge worthy of a trip to the center, but which could be dealt with via online resources such as video tutorials and activities. Accordingly, activities and resources related to specific problems such as sentence fragments and run-ons, along with referencing and plagiarism, were added over the course of the semester based on the requests of instructors.

All second-year students taking departmental EAP classes (due to the design of the program, these students are the only departmental students taking English skills classes in the first semester of each year) were provided with a printed handout that outlined how to access the center online and the resources available, including how to make reservations for the advising service. A free online Learning Management System (LMS) called ‘Language Cloud’ was chosen to host the writing center space online. This platform was chosen because it was a free service, had an easy to use interface, provided information in English and

Japanese, and was accessible via mobile devices such as smartphones. Furthermore, it allowed unlimited attachments and for online videos and links to be embedded smoothly.

### **Cycle One: Survey Results**

At the end of the first cycle, a survey was carried out to investigate students' evaluations of the center and its services. A five-item survey was distributed online using Google forms to approximately 160 second-year students, which generated 90 responses. A final comment section asked student for additional comments or suggestions. The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Semester One Survey Results

<i>(1) How did you hear about the Writing Center? (n = 90)</i>	Didn't know about it	Other students	Teachers	Other		
	3% (n=3)	4% (n=4)	92% (n=83)	0% (n=0)		
<i>(2) Which services, if any, did you use? (n = 88)</i>	Advising service	Writing resources online	Did not use			
	6% (n=5)	22% (n=19)	73% (n=64)			
<i>(3) If you didn't use the Writing Center (Advising service), why not? (n = 72)</i>	Didn't have enough time for feedback	Didn't know the location	Didn't know how to make an appointment	Don't need the service	Inconvenient hours of the service	Services aren't useful
	65% (n=47)	10% (n=7)	14% (n=10)	4% (n=3)	7% (n=5)	0% (n=0)
<i>(4) Which part of your writing are you most worried about? (n = 73)</i>	Academic style	Citations	Grammar	Organization	Thesis statements	Topic sentences
	33% (n=24)	37% (n=27)	21% (n=15)	5% (n=4)	1% (n=1)	3% (n=2)
<i>(5) In getting feedback for your writing, which style</i>	Face-to-face		Email feedback		Chat feedback (e.g. Skype)	

<i>would you prefer?</i> (n = 88)	53% (n=47)	42% (n=37)	5% (n=4)
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Only 6% of respondents reported using the face-to-face advising service. However, 22% of students reported that they had accessed the online resources. A majority (73%) of students reported not using either the face-to-face service or access the online resources. This strongly suggested that the service did not meet the needs of students; it was clear that further developments were needed to the writing center services in order to make them more useful. Although the team was encouraged that no students reported the advising service to be not useful, the major reason reported for non-usage concerned student time constraints and inconvenient opening hours. This was problematic, because the advising service could not be expanded due to limited peer availability along with budget and space constraints. The responses to question three “If you didn’t use the Writing Center (Advising service), why not?” indicated that our team’s inference had been correct that students were not using the system due to a lack of time, poor time management (e.g. working on writing assignments at the last minute), and a view that the service was for improving their assignments prior to submission.

Although students had been provided with an information handout about the service, 10% of students reported that they did not know the location or the service, a difficulty noted by other centers (McKinley, 2011) which likely reflects that many may not have even read the information. Furthermore, 14% reported difficulties with the appointment service, indicating that in dealing with the problem of reducing students being unable to see tutors, the introduction of the reservation system had created an additional layer of complexity for students. Furthermore, 7% reported inconvenient hours. This suggests that access, organization, and timing were significant issues for the face-to-face advising system to overcome.

Finally, we reasoned that the responses to question five “In getting feedback for your writing, which style would you prefer?” suggested that while a majority of students reported that they would prefer face-to-face feedback, students were open to alternative ways of organizing the advising service via email or online chat, if a suitable format for online submission could be integrated. Thus, researching a feasible means for submitting writing online for feedback was set as a goal for the second cycle.

Overall, the survey data suggested that the peer advising service was not positioned to appeal to students effectively. To compound the problem, the leader of the writing center was informed that room availability would be severely limited for the writing center in the following semester (specifically, for only a few weeks of the semester). On the other hand, the online lab had been used by nearly a quarter of students in the first cycle. Accordingly, two primary actions were decided by the BBL team for cycle two: (1) the peer advising service would be suspended due to the room availability issue, and because the considerable use of budget and resources in providing peers in time slots on multiple days of the week was not deemed to be justified by the usage data; and (2) resources would instead be used to expand the center online by retaining one peer, part time, to assist with developing resources for the writing center online. As a result, the writing center would become only an online ‘lab’ for the second cycle.

### **Cycle Two: Expansion of the Online Resources**

Cycle two was carried out during the second semester of 2013, and involved the expansion of the online resources for students, and the suspension of the advising service. One part-time graduate exchange student was hired and worked on developing resources for the online space for approximately three hours per week. Resources were added based on the areas reported by students in question four of the cycle one survey, leading to the creation of three distinct sections in the online lab related to academic style, citations, and grammar. Resources were sourced online by linking to online activities and video tutorials about writing skills, or developed by the instructors or part-time peer.

During the semester, the amount of materials in the space more than doubled, with specific areas added which focused on skills being developed in the two academic English skills courses being taught in the department that semester, along with general resources for writing skills development. Course instructors also provided suggestions for materials, such as information videos about plagiarism, which were added throughout the semester. Students were automatically added to the online lab by the writing center administrator, and after each update, each user was emailed (via the message function built into the LMS) with details of new resources and activities.

### Cycle Two: Survey Results

At the end of the second cycle, a survey was used to investigate students' evaluations of the (online) center and its resources. Five items were added to the online end-of-semester student surveys for each of the two academic English courses being taught in the department that semester. The surveys were administered online using 'Survey Monkey', and students were given the option to allow their responses to be used for research purposes. The data of those who agreed were provided to the researcher for analysis. Accordingly, 195 first-year student responses and 104 second-year student responses were collated for analysis. The results are summarized in Table 2 (first year students) and Table 3 (second year students) below.

Table 2: Semester Two Survey Results for First-year Students

<i>(1) Did you access the COB Writing and Support Center on 'Language Cloud' this semester? (n = 191)</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
	58% (n=111)	42% (n=80)		
<hr/>				
<i>(2) Choose the reasons why you accessed the Writing and Support Center (n = 108) Students could choose more than one answer</i>	To access the Writing Guidelines for assignments <sup>1</sup>	To find out about how to write my essay	To find out about citations	Other
	65% (n=70)	38% (n=41)	36% (n=39)	4% (n=4)
<hr/>				
<i>(3) Please indicate how useful you found the information on the Writing and Support Center (n = 109)</i>	Not useful at all	Not very useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	1% (n=1)	5% (n=6)	70% (n=76)	24% (n=26)

<sup>1</sup> These vary by course, but are based on the 'Chicago' style

<i>(4) Why didn't you access the Writing and Support Center? (n = 78) Students could choose more than one answer</i>	I didn't need it	I didn't know how to access it	Other (please specify)
	43% (n=34)	62% (n=48)	5% (n=4) Did not know: 50% (n=2) Asked Friends: 25% (n=1) Used other sites: 50% (n=1)
<i>(5) Do you have any suggestions for improving the Writing and Support Center? E.g. Are there any materials or areas that you would like added? (n = 18)</i>	Nothing special: 50% (n=9) Citations and footnotes: 26% (n=5) Grammar and punctuation: 6% (n=1) Want to submit work for review: 6% (n=1) More resources for learning English in general: 6% (n=1) Resources in Japanese: 6% (n=1)		

Table 3: Semester Two Survey Results for Second-year Students

<i>(1) Did you access the COB Writing and Support Center on 'Language Cloud' this semester? (n = 97)</i>	Yes		No	
	13% (n=13)		87% (n=84)	
<i>(2) Choose the reasons why you accessed the Writing and Support Center (n = 11) Students could choose more than one answer</i>	To access the Writing Guidelines	To find out about how to write my essay	To find out about citations	Other (Please specify)
	55% (n=6)	46% (n=5)	27% (n=3)	9% (n=1)
<i>(3) Please indicate how useful you found the information on the Writing and Support Center (n = 12)</i>	Not useful at all	Not very useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=12)	0% (n=0)

<i>(4) Why didn't you access the Writing and Support Center? (n = 83) Students could choose more than one answer</i>	I didn't need it	I didn't know how to access it	Other (please specify)
	28% (n=23)	56% (n=47)	5% (n=15) Forgot: 20% (n=3) Difficult to use: 1% (n=2) Not useful: 1% (n=1) No time: 68% (n=9)
<i>(5) Do you have any suggestions for improving the Writing and Support Center? E.g. Are there any materials or areas that you would like added? (n = 0)</i>			
No responses			

The results showed dramatically different rates of access rates for first-year versus second-year students. More than half (58%) of first-year students reported accessing the center online. This was most likely because first year students also used Language Cloud as a resource for their English for Academic Purposes course, which linked to the writing center online via students' 'dashboard' (a notification center which is displayed when users login). This meant that they were automatically added to the center as members and received notifications and messages such as updates from the writing center. As a result, there were low barriers to access the center, they were familiar with the platform housing the writing center, could access the resources more easily, and received updates about the center. This integration of self-access materials with the class LMS appears to have been effective.

On the other hand, only 13% of second year students reported that they accessed the online center. Furthermore, a small number of second year students (n=2) reported that they thought the entire writing center had been terminated (not only the face-to-face advising service). Second year students did not use Language Cloud for their classes and were required to sign-up for the service in order to gain access (i.e. opt-in), adding another step for them when they wanted support. Furthermore, they were not required to produce academic written texts for their BBL courses, which is more focused on reading skills and business vocabulary development. Second year students *were* required to produce reports and proposals in their other classes, and it is likely that students who did access the online center were doing so to access resources to help with those assignments.

Overall, the cycle two survey results indicated that the materials added to the online 'lab' met the needs of students; more than 90% of first year students (and all second year

students) reported the information they accessed on the center as being useful or very useful. Interestingly, 65% of first year students who used the service did so simply to check the writing and citation guidelines of the department, which are available on the site, as well as learn new skills. In this respect, the team's initial hypothesis appears correct, that students may have had relatively straightforward concerns that could be dealt with via online resources.

### **Future Developments**

The survey results may suggest that expanding the service to include more general materials will respond to a latent demand (i.e. that some students already see the service as having value for supporting areas of language development beyond writing). Two first year students requested general English and grammar related materials be added to the service. Thus, it is expected that the writing center will change from a narrow, to wider, focus in the future. As Johnston, Cornwell, and Yoshida (2008) explain:

EFL learners, in particular, need support not only in writing, but also in areas such as speaking, grammar, mechanics, oral presentations, and essay writing. In addition, these students need to gain confidence in using their second language. Thus, as more and more writing centers are established, they will take on broad and varied roles in supporting student development (Johnston et al., 2008, p. 182)

Secondly, the first year student data suggested that citations remained a major concern for students, with five students requesting more materials. An example comment was "I wish there were more examples of how to cite on each material", which highlighted how the online center can provide value to students and link to the curriculum materials. As the 'Writing Guidelines' provided to students in class usually only provide a small number of example citations or general information about writing style, the online center can explain examples from the full style guide and provide examples of nearly all types of citations that students use in their writing. The ease with which videos can be embedded also allows the peer tutor to provide tutorials based on specific requests and concerns. An example is one student who commented, "I wanted to know more about the rules for capitalization" which led to the sourcing of a video tutorial online which was embedded in a tutorial with information about that problem. These requests showed that a mechanism is needed for allowing students to request materials directly during the semester, rather than relying on teachers' judgments of

requirements. Accordingly, adding such a mechanism to the online lab (using a messaging function) is one development to be implemented in cycle three.

A comment by one first-year student provided the team with a question: Should support materials be provided in English, Japanese, or both? The student commented, “Please prepare Japanese sentence!”, raising the issue that some students may not be able to effectively process and make use of the resources online if they are provided only in English. As Tan (2011) notes, many writing centers in Asian contexts provide bilingual support or resources, and Nakatake (2013) cited the use of Japanese by tutors as a key reason for the success of the writing center in that study. Accordingly, one action proposed for future cycles is to add a Japanese native speaker to the peer team to assist in developing support materials in Japanese.

It was also decided to re-introduce the advising service. Although only one student comment directly requested to be able to submit work for review and advice online, the LMS used for the online center added features during the second cycle that easily allowed for the submission, mark-up, and feedback of written work. Accordingly, the major action to be implemented in cycle three is to increase the number of peers again (initially to two) and re-introduce the advising service via an online model, where students can submit work for review and advice to exchange students in English (and in the future it is hoped the service will expand to allow students to request advice in or Japanese peers in Japanese. Submission and future student survey data will be used to evaluate if and how either of these services, or both, are suitable for retention and further development.

Finally, only 13% of second year students accessed the service in the second cycle. Accordingly, two actions are already planned for *cycle four* (i.e. the corresponding semester in 2014) to improve knowledge about, and the relevance of, the service for second year students in the second semester: (1) More materials and information directly related to the second semester second year course will be added, including materials not only focused on writing, but also general skills development; and (2) information about the center will be added to the course orientation materials for second year courses at the beginning of second semester.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Other Contexts**

In conclusion, the data collected in the two cycles of the action research project led to major changes in the way that department resources were utilized, resulting in a major

reorganization of the center from a face-to-face service in favor of an online ‘lab’ model. These changes have resulted in significant increases in reported students usage and have smoothly integrated the writing center into the learning context as an easily accessible resource. Furthermore, as the LMS has expanded features which allow for the submission and ‘mark-up’ of student work, the center is moving towards a fully online model involving two components: A materials lab with resources and workshops, and an online peer support service which students can access from any location. In this respect, the center will come full circle.

Due to the highly situated nature of the action research, the problem solving process in the study is viewed as ‘reflective rationality’, where complex problems require specific situated solutions that are developed in collaboration with the practitioner(s) (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993). Accordingly, care should be taken when suggesting implications for other writing centers with different problems. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the actions taken in the current study can provide examples that could be tested by others in different contexts (Altrichter et al., 1993), and that there may be some lessons for other writing centers, which are explained below.

Firstly, the change to an online model has been effective for overcoming the time, space, and budget constraints faced by the COB Writing Center. While the change to an online ‘lab’ model meant losing individualized support during the second cycle, more students are using the writing center and reported positive feedback about the service in the survey. The online system means that students can access resources at any time, from any device with an Internet connection, overcoming the space and room availability problems we encountered. Furthermore, technological advancements are making sophisticated submission and feedback features freely accessible, and the addition of these features to the LMS used by our center, will allow us to re-integrate individualized support into an online model. Thus, for small centers with limited budget or significant constraints similar to the COB Writing Center, there may be considerable value experimenting with online models.

Finally, this study has shown the need for data-driven analysis within a framework (such as the action research spiral) for guiding change decisions and implementation, rather than relying on intuition and anecdotal accounts from team members. The addition of a small number of items to the departmental end of semester course surveys has provided the team with data which can be analyzed and considered by the team in guiding decisions. In this respect, the experience of the COB Writing Center follows that of others reported in the literature (LaClare & Franz, 2013; McKinley, 2011) where being user-focused and generating

user data has helped the purpose and mission of the writing center to be better understood. Thus in the writing center in the LaClare and Franz (2013) study, retaining a face-to-face consulting service was argued to be most suitable for meeting the needs of students, a conclusion they inferred by collecting data about their users. On the other hand, McKinley (2011) outlined how workshops were helping to attract users to their writing center, and student survey data was informing change in what aspects tutors focused upon. In both contexts, a little data went a long way. As our writing center is becoming more focused on student-demand, decisions are becoming less about orthodoxy and more about meeting the needs of students. In this respect, the COB Writing Center is discovering its place within the institution.

### **Notes on the contributor**

Gene Thompson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Global Business at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. His primary research interests include teacher training, teacher efficacy, and teacher cognitions. He also maintains an interest in the integration of curriculum and self-access, as well as the use of technology in the classroom.

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