

Interview with Dr. Walters

Northern Michigan University April 8, 1996
Regarding Writing Center, Writing Proficiency Exam and the English Department in General.

Int: Dr. Walters how long have you worked at NMU?

KW: Full time since 1970 part time a few years before that.

INT: What do you see as the purpose of the English Department

KW: Two purposes I think one is what they call Service Course, Service department which is preparing people from departments other than English department to be able to write and read literature that sort of thing. The other thing is just training English majors. And I think the University sees us more as a more the service part of the department as being really important, the English department does too, but it is sort of, I don't want to say a conflict, but sort of going in two different directions.

INT: okay, You are the director of the writing center, How long have you been that?

KW: Since January of '94.

INT: okay, what is the purpose of the writing center.

KW: I can tell you what the purpose isn't first. A lot of people, students especially, think that the writing center is a place to get their papers fixed up get their papers checked, their commas fixed and that sort of thing and I think even faculty from other departments have that idea. I not really sure, but that's the language they use with me a lot of the time. And we seem to be held responsible for any mistakes we don't pick up on peoples papers, by students and faculty. But that is not my idea of the purpose of the writing center. The purpose of the writing center to me is that a place that students have a place they can come and get individual help. If people are teaching as most people do in the English department, to composition courses plus another course, they have 50 students in composition classes and they can't fit 10 or 15 minuets a week with students that would be, I am not too good in math, but that would be a lot of hours that would be 15 or 20 hours right there. Besides which students are a lot of times kind of intimidated about with sitting down with professor and talking about the paper. I think that the writing center for one thing provides a person with the time to go over someone's paper and a person who isn't as intimidating as the person professor might be. And the, what I want to see is that tutors help people help themselves rather than fixing up a paper.

INT: do you know when the writing center was started?

KW: yes 1971. This is it's 25th or 24th year.

INT: Do you know why the writing center was started, what caused it to come about, how did someone get the idea.

KW: There was a movement towards writing centers, towards peer tutoring at that time. Part of it had to do with the fact that different populations were attending college. Before just people, bookish people went to college. In the 60's and 70's a lot of people who probably wouldn't of gone to college at any time previous to that started going to college. Part of it was Viet Nam, avoid the draft, a lot of guys went to college that never would of gone, change in the demands for the job, all of those kind of things, fact that harder for a man anyway to graduate from college get a job that he can support a family with, it was possible for a women used to be possible for a man, it isn't so much any more. so there a lot of people going to college who aren't readers or aren't writers. And so there is that kind of pressure placed on professors to deal with people who weren't good writers or readers or inexperienced readers or writers. So I felt kind of where the whole writing center came from, but it wasn't just, although Northern was one of the earliest writing centers. I may be wrong about this, but I think a lot of it has to do with Mark Smith who has given accomplishment expert ?? that was going on he was kind of in the forefront of all of this. But it is a national ? and it still is.

INT: okay, I don't know if this is related to the writing center, but you are the director of the writing proficiency exam. Okay how long have you had that position?

KW: Since fall of '94, it is about one semester longer than the writing center.

INT: Okay, what is the purpose of the writing proficiency exam.

KW: Well obviously to assure that people who graduate from Northern are proficient writers. I think, the way I had it explained to me when I took this job was that what we want to achieve is that when someone graduates from Northern and gets a job they write a memo that the boss, at least the writing doesn't stand out as being awful, the boss doesn't look at the memo and say where the heck did you graduate from? He says Northern and they wonder what the world do they do at Northern. Ahm, proficient is I guess I think of it as, when they write a memo the boss isn't going to say well this is the best memo I ever read, but it isn't going to stand out to being awful either.

INT: Do you know when the writing proficiency exam was started?

KW: The early '70's, I don't know the exact year.

INT: Was it started as a national movement to or..

KW: I am not so sure about that, there is right now a there is a lot of emphasis on outcome's assessment. And so the writing exam fits in very well with that. I think the English Department is

less committed to the proficiency exam. That it was the academic senate that decided we were going to have a proficiency exam. And it was up to the English Department to administer it and decide on what kind of exam it was going to be and all that sort of thing. There is a big movement toward portfolio's now and we kind of talked about including portfolio's out of it.

INT: For all the majors or English majors?

KW: For everyone and that's not anything that is in the works but they are kind of talking about it.

INT: Is there anything you would like to add or any directions you see anything related to the English department going in the future.

KW: I don't think so, I have some hunches about the English Department, but I am very focused on the writing exam and the writing center. So I guess I wouldn't speculate on the whole department.

INT: Would you say the writing exam and the writing center are really linked together or would you say they are separate entities?

KW: Well definitely separate entities. I think it works out okay to for the one person to be directing both of them. Because I a lot of times send of people over to the writing center who have problems with the writing exam. Also a lot of people who talk with me about one or the other and in peoples minds they seem to be sort of interrelated, even though they aren't in mind. But people will ask me to speak to their classes about the proficiency exam or they will call up if their students aren't passing the proficiency exam and then I can send them over to the writing center. And know that the two are working together. But philosophically I don't think the two are related.

INT: okay, alright I think that is everything I had.

KW: if you have any other questions, you know where to find me.

INT: okay.