PEER ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

Speakers: John Bean, Montana State University
Mark Waldo, Montana State University
Introducer/Recorder: Lynne Hahn, University of Akron, Ohio

After a brief overview by John Bean, Director of Writing at Montana State University, Mark Waldo, Director of the Writing Center, began his talk by taking a strong stand for writing centers that eschew drill-and-fill-in exercises, slides, tapes, and workbooks. He also took to task those critics who feel that writing centers have not effectively dealt with the writing crisis and those who see these labs as places to go only for help with mechanics. Writing centers, Waldo feels, suffer from an image problem, even though in recent years there has been an adjustment of some negative perceptions.

Waldo described the model in place at Montana State University. Neither a grammar garage nor a comma clinic, he said, the writing center at his university maintains a tutorial staff of thirty-five that comprises instructors of the freshman English program, professional tutors with at least bachelor's degrees, and trained student tutors. All use the students' own writing along with the to become more effective writers. Waldo underscored the inquiry method and dialogue as the means of aiding them fact that the Center is not a hub for remedial attention. Rather, students are active participants in the process of writing. They respond to questions by readers/listeners which only they, as writers, can answer. Asking questions that relate directly to the experiences of the writers, tutors engage in dialogues with student-writers that often last the duration of the first session, thirty-five to forty minutes. At a later meeting, tutor and tutee shape the details elicited in such conversations to fit the assignment. The strength of the inquiry method is seen in its effectiveness in evaluating overall strengths and weaknesses of an essay, in solving coherence problems, and in identifying diction, syntax, and even mechanics and usage problems as they occur.

Waldo also pointed to some problems in this method of working with students. The primary one is the artificiality inherent in this mode of communication, which, coupled with having to wait for responses, makes some tutors uncomfortable. Tutees who go to the writing center to get answers may feel frustrated when, instead, they meet with questions. Another problem is that a student who takes a graded paper to the Center for evaluation may want justification for the grade assigned. However, in such instances tutors give only their own evaluations and do not attempt to speak for classroom teachers. Sup-

porters of the inquiry method feel that its advantages strongly outweigh its disadvantages, mainly because it puts the student writer at the center of his composing process, actively engaging him and obliging him to take responsibility for his writing.

Waldo reported that student testimony supports Montana State's approach to assisting students as they write: Students feel more at ease, they are more confident, and they feel satisfied with taking responsibility for their work. Student testimony notwithstanding, Writing Center personnel sought an empirical method for evaluating the effectiveness of their tutorial help. To that end, 140 randomly selected students were anonymously tracked through the 1984-85 school year, with the following results: On a twelve-point scale for a three-essay average, the grade average for students who had not attended the Writing Center was 7.5; the grade average for the same number of essays of students attending the Writing Center was 8.3, a difference equivalent to half a letter grade. In a university that does not use plus and minus grades, Waldo pointed out, that difference often translates into a full letter grade (*C* to *B*).

The results, though gratifying, did not show a clear causal relationship, because the selection process did not take into account the two groups most likely to use the facility, motivated strong writers and less secure basic writers. Nor did the experiment demonstrate conclusive proof, because a control group had not been used. For these reasons, another, more scientific, experiment was designed and implemented with a construction engineering student population. With the professor's cooperation, a class was divided into two groups—one control and one experimental—comprising randomly selected students. Papers were scored by an independent grader. Those visiting the Center scored eight points higher on their first papers than those who did not attend. On the second paper, attendance at the Writing Center was required of the group denied access during the writing of the first paper. Positive findings again resulted: Students attending received grades on their papers averaging nine points higher than their papers received when they had not attended the Center. The statistics compiled thus revealed a strong correlation between Center visits and improved scores on written papers. Waldo believes this empirical data supports the hypothesis that Writing Center tutors do intervene effectively in the writing process and that the Writing Center, indeed, does work.

The second presentation of the session was given by John Bean, who discussed Writing Across the Curriculum, specifically as it exists in a 700-student freshman psychology course at Montana State University. Funded by a FIPSE grant (1981-83), the course, along with other core courses, incorporates writing assignments into the class format. Undergraduate facilitators (junior and senior psychology majors) grade written assignments, which are either journal entries (four fifteen-minute entries per week for eight weeks) or short essays (two-page responses) to problems designed to help students master key concepts. Student facilitators establish grading criteria via morning sessions in which they select anchor papers and practice grading. They also tutor students during the drafting process, and they report that participation in the morning sessions significantly enhances their tutorial skills.

Bean believes that the system in place is quite effective. Students feel that they are critical thinkers and active participants in their education. Goals include such things as learning to ask the kinds of questions psychologists ask, developing a knowledge base about psychology, learning how psychologists try to answer questions, understanding why psychologists may disagree, learning how to think and to conduct an argument, and experiencing changes in the role learner. Guided journal tasks are similar to the following examples from Bean's handout:

> **Task 17:** Do dogs and cats think? Start making notes toward a dialogue between two people who disagree on this issue. Have one person try to explain dog and cat behavior in terms of operant conditioning only. Have another argue that social and/or cognitive learning might also be needed to explain certain animal behaviors.
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> **Task 18:** Write about anything that you want to that is related to this course.
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> **Task 21:** In your own words, explain why a learned behavior is less resistant to extinction if it is reinforced regularly rather than occasionally. Give hypothetical examples different from those in the text.

Bean discussed the following example of an essay assignment, which is typical of those for the course. Students are presented with a prompt describing a situation wherein a student has written to his grandmother requesting financial help for the purchase of a word processor so that he can succeed in college. As part of his letter, he has included research data claiming that the word processor has helped other college students excel in their work. Responding psychology students are asked to assume the role of the grandmother writing to her grandson about the research information he has provided to convince her to purchase the processor. Criteria for successfully composing the essay include specific details about the points to be addressed (identifying experimental flaws and explaining them with detail that will teach the grandson some essential principles of experimental design). Further instructions about the writing itself remind the student to organize his ideas so that they are easy to follow and to write clearly and grammatically, without distracting errors in spelling, punctuation, or usage.

Facilitators/graders receive clear instructions regarding the evaluation of these essays through the use of anchor papers and detailed points to consider while reading the psychology essays. Examples of these instructions and other samples—essays, anchor papers, grading criteria, and additional assignments—were distributed at the conference session and are also available by mail from John Bean.■