



# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NWCA:NCTE  
Information Exchange Agreement

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With this issue the newsletter will be suspending publication for the summer months of July and August. As the prospect of some quiet time approaches, you no doubt are also breathing a sigh of relief as you wind down for the end of the year's activities and begin to plan your summer agenda. As you do, please consider adding the following items to your list:

1. Plan on writing something for the newsletter. While there is a huge stack of manuscripts waiting for next year's volume of the newsletter, there are far too many of our group whom we haven't heard from. What kind of activities is your lab engaged in? What can your tutors add to the Tutor's Corner? What services have you added? What perennial problems do you confront--and what solutions have you tried? How do you train tutors? In what ways does your lab coordinate with your school's writing program? Have you devised some interesting public relations tactics? What philosophies govern your view of tutorial teaching and writing labs? We all have a great deal to share with each other, so please consider contributing to this exchange by doing some writing this summer.

2. Remind yourself to send in your yearly donation. Since the newsletter is an informal publication, with no subscription fee as such (or bills--or invoices), its existence depends on the donations you send in. Those donations keep us afloat (barely), but with increased expenses this year, we are asking for a larger donation. The enclosed sheet explains all that, and we hope you'll respond as generously as you have in the past.

3. Have a pleasant, relaxing, productive summer. You've earned it!

4. Keep sending your articles--along with your announcements, reviews,

questions, comments, names of new members, and donations of \$7.50 (in checks made payable to Purdue University, but sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor  
Writing Lab Newsletter  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47907

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## CARLETON TUTORS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

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The Writing Tutorial Service at Carleton University has now moved out into the business world. About a year ago I started Carleton Writing Consultants, a service which provides one-on-one tutorials for members of the public and private sectors. We begin by assessing the quality of documentation being produced by our clients and then design workshops commensurate with our findings. Just like our university tutorials, we operate a hands-on approach to writing instruction. All participants must work on assignments that are actually a part of their normal workday. We don't, however, have them come to the university and partake in an artificial classroom setting. Rather we go to the clients' place of work so that, first, the instruction disrupts their schedules as little as possible and second, and most important, that it truly takes place within the appropriate context.

Ideally we like to assist the writers from the inception through to the completion of their assignments. Therefore, if they are working on, for instance, a 40-page report, we will work with them during the month or so that it normally takes to complete the task.

Usually we limit the enrollment to 6-8 people per course and combine group instruction--an introduction to the writing process and the reader's needs, several

sessions of "peer criticism" to heighten their awareness of their readers, etc.--with individual tutorials.

To date, it has been favourably received, and we have worked with a wide cross-section of writers, from secretaries and administrative assistants to auditors, engineers and lawyers. One of the most rewarding aspects, other than the fact that we seem to be serving a real need, is that we are providing employment for our tutors who have been with the university's Tutorial Service.

This is not to say that there have not been problems. (Where do you want me to begin?) Needless to say when you are designing courses to meet specific needs you have to have a good understanding of what those needs are. Usually I try to conduct several information sessions with the Department heads and the participants to enable me to deduce (and hopefully intuit) what sorts of problems exist. As well, we examine the products being produced by each and every participant as well as their superiors. Nevertheless, sometimes we don't have a true understanding of what their problems are until we are a third or even half way into the course. In fact, the whole thing is not unlike sailing--a continual need to adjust one's sails depending upon which way the wind is blowing! You might say, for that matter, isn't all teaching like sailing. But mature writers (problems or not) do not accept our "authority" as readily as first, second or even third year students. To begin with we have to prove to them that we of the "ivory tower existence" do know how the "real world" operates and better yet, should operate as far as effective communication is concerned. Someday I intend to "write-up" our general methodology and various experiences. For the moment, however, I'm still in the process of trying to acquire my sea-legs!

Toni Miller  
Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario

From the *News Bulletin*, a faculty-staff newspaper at Michigan State University:

"The [provost search] committee is seeking a predecessor for Provost Lee Winder, who will relinquish his administrative duties July 1."

It's good to find one's roots.

From The Chronicle of Higher Education  
(March 26, 1986)

## PROGRESS REPORT OF THE KENMORE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING LAB

Although the Writing Lab at Kenmore High School has been open for only 49 days, it has served 343 students. The variety of courses at the high school account for the diverse help given to the students. For example, seniors taking Honors English seek help in writing college entrance essays as well as in organizing the different steps in writing a research paper. Students from Speech not only write speeches at the Writing Lab, but also use the Lab tutors as their audience and sounding board for their speech content. Freshmen, in a collaborative effort with other students in the Lab, attempt to write concrete poems or descriptive paragraphs. Students in other English courses come to the Writing Lab for help in sentence combining or comprehension of a literary genre; still others have used the Lab to proofread their work in progress, to review grammar, to write newsletters, critiques, and scripts for their classes.

The Writing Lab is frequently used by students in Restaurant Management, Economics, History, and the Reading Lab. From the Vocational wing students seek help in writing job descriptions, trade and machine reports, and the like, while Reading Lab students write letters to their favorite authors asking questions about the stories or attempt to provide different endings to the novels read. Moreover, teachers of French and Spanish, who also tutor at the Writing Lab, draw the foreign language student to practice writing in such languages at the Lab.

The Kenmore High School Writing Lab fulfills many needs. The tutors are enthusiastic and dedicated, providing a nonthreatening environment in which students feel comfortable asking for help with their writing process. Once students have learned to generate ideas for content, it is easier for them to write, knowing they have something to say. Moreover, each time students return to the Lab for regular help, they are able to focus on specifics in their writing. Their awareness of the various steps in the writing process will eventually make them critics of their own work, a trait that an effective writer needs.

The Writing Lab at Kenmore High School has become a resource center for tutors, teachers, and students as well. Besides the

usual dictionaries, word-finders, and text-books, there are folders with the latest professional journal articles on tutoring, grading, teaching grammar and composition. Teachers at Kenmore have added their own handouts that have proven successful in teaching specific topics. There are also "How-to" (fill out job applications, avoid wordiness, correct fragments, etc.) handouts with explanations and exercises for students to use independently.

The Writing Lab also offers mini-workshops or seminars on specific topics. A tutor may lecture in the classroom about methods of invention, how to do research for a term paper, or how to improve spelling. In the future the Kenmore Writing Lab hopes to provide other valuable help.

Rosa I. Bhakuni  
Kenmore High School  
Akron, Ohio

A READER ASKS . . . .

I am seeking assistance in finding a remedial writing laboratory, preferably in the northern or northwestern part of this nation, that would accept me as a full-time employee while I take courses in an adult education graduate program at the respective university or a nearby university or college. I want the experience to relate to my courses and my background. The people to whom I would like to return to teach are the people of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where I have lived for 21 years, particularly the people of the Keweenaw Peninsula, where I have lived for 18 years and which has a large population of retired and vocationally-minded people. I need an income that can support a single person without children and yet would provide enough flexibility to take courses toward adult education.

Rosemary E. Hampton  
11132 Birky Drive, Route 1  
Spencerville, IN 46788  
(219-627-3432)

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

9th National Conference on  
College Learning Assistance Centers  
May 14-16, 1987

sponsored by  
Long Island University  
Office of Special Academic Services

For information about proposals, which must be submitted by Feb. 1, 1987, contact:

Elaine A. Caputo  
Conference Chairperson  
Special Academic Services  
Long Island University  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 403-1020

OUR READERS COMMENT . . . .

Our writing center, "The Write Place," opened in September this year at Howard High School and operates full time on a block grant from the Howard County Board of Education under the direction of Mrs. Niki Fortunato and Mrs. Linda Storey. We use peer tutors, faculty facilitators, and community volunteers as staff. We also have a full computer set-up for word processing and composition analysis. Our program is closely tied to the concept of writing across the curriculum, and our goals include motivating teachers of all subjects to include writing assignments in their classroom. The directors actively plan writing activities with teachers.

Mrs. Niki Fortunato  
Mrs. Linda Storey  
Howard High School  
Ellicott City, MD

The National Center for Developmental Education is holding its first

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS IN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

October 19-23, 1986  
Atlanta, Georgia

For more information contact: Elaine Bingham, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (704/262-3057).

Attn: HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Would you be interested in attending a workshop on how to start a writing lab? If so, we'd like to hear from you because the National Writing Centers Association is considering sponsoring such a workshop at Purdue University if there is sufficient interest.

Specifically, we are considering the possibility of developing a short, intensive, possibly credit-bearing workshop that addresses the problems of starting and administering a high school writing lab. To get some sense of the potential interest in this and to tailor such a workshop to real needs, we'd appreciate hearing your answers to the following:

Your name:

Your school address:

Your home address:

Why would such a workshop be of interest to you?

What important issues would you want addressed?

What conditions would make it possible or desirable for you to attend? (Funding? Need for graduate credit? Optimum dates and times? Location? Issues to be addressed?) Would you prefer a two or three day non-credit workshop or a ten-day to two-week credit bearing (perhaps two or three graduate credits) workshop?

Would June or July, 1987 be a favorable time?

What kinds of resource people should be available at such a course or workshop? (If you can suggest any people as resources, yourself included, please include that person's name, address, and qualifications.)

Please send your responses, by August 1, to: Robert Child, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907. (317/494-3723)

## CRISIS INTERVENTION IN THE WRITING CENTER

"All the lonely people,  
Where do they all come from?"

It is inevitable every school term that writing center tutors and directors must deal with a small number of students who have severe personal problems in addition to their writing deficiencies. These students, who may have been unable to establish personal relationships on campus because they lack social communication skills, are often attracted to the one-to-one tutoring situation offered by many writing centers. Such students may develop a strong attachment to their tutor as a substitute for other social interaction, and although these students represent a small fraction of the total using writing centers, they can disrupt the work of the centers if the tutors are not able to deal with their special behavior problems.

Because students and tutors have mutually supportive goals in mind when they spend time together in writing centers, their interaction lays the foundation for establishing rapport. Students typically think that they can improve their writing through encounters with tutors who are professionally trained to aid students. Tutors have different goals but ones that complement those of students. Some tutors fulfill their need to nurture while others seek success or accomplishment through their students' improvements. Certainly tutors also enjoy the status and recognition they gain from their positions. Students and tutors receive satisfaction from this traditional tutoring relationship. Occasionally, however, students may be so burdened by personal problems that they will be unable to concentrate on the educational goals of tutoring sessions. Instead, they may unconsciously use the rapport established during their appointments to try to shift the relationship from that of student and tutor to one of friends. Some students become so attached to their new found "friends" that they refuse to work with anyone else if their particular tutor is absent. Psychologists Dorothy Johnson and Mary Vestermark warn of similar problems that occur in professional counseling. The hazard they identify for counseling situations of the client "holding on" i.e., becoming overly dependent, is also applicable to tutoring (193). As tragic as it may sound, for some students, the

interaction they get through the tutoring relationship may be their only personally satisfying one.

Several student cases illustrate the types of challenges writing center staff may face. Dave M., a shy sophomore, has only minimal problems with his writing, yet he has attended the Middle Tennessee State University Writing Center for the last three semesters under the guise of improving his writing. Dave attends the Writing Center primarily for the interaction he experiences with his tutors. He has found that he is welcomed in the tutoring situation and receives attention there. In spite of his bashful personality, communication can occur because discussions of his papers initiated by his tutors provide a basis for interaction. In addition to his two weekly scheduled appointments, Dave visits the Writing Center every day to say hello to his tutors. If they are not busy, he awkwardly attempts to chat about the weather, sports, or any topic that will enable him to respond to a friendly face, if only for a few minutes.

Dave, wistfully seeking companionship, presents only a mild drain on the tutors' time, but for other students, their loneliness can create life crises resulting in obstreperous behavior in the Writing Center. Take the case of Joe D., for instance, who is clearly a lonely student clamoring for attention. Joe's involvement in the Writing Center was a problem from the start. Having failed an English composition, Joe arrived agitated and angry. He argued with the tutor about scheduling appointment hours and about the goals of the tutoring sessions. When his emotional display escalated to the point of swearing and slamming books on the table, the tutor told the student to restrain himself or he would have to leave. The tutor later explained to me that Joe's "emotional display distracted and upset the other students who were working." Joe left the Writing Center, slamming the door, only to return the next day apologizing and trying to maintain his composure. In spite of Joe's earlier behavior, I instructed the tutors to try to work with him, and I was sure to be present to observe the tutoring. It soon became clear from his writing topics

that this student was desperate for friendship. In one paper in which he describes his futile attempts to become friends with football players in his dormitory, Joe writes, "I was looking to be friends with anybody. As a matter of record, I am lonely and I was lonely."

Throughout his tutoring sessions Joe was distracted from his writing, paying more attention to others in the room than to his work. He eavesdropped on conversations between students and tutors and tried to involve himself as tutor in the instruction of other students. In searching for information about how to help this student, I talked with Joe's English teacher. I learned that for his composition class Joe had written a paper in which he recounted the staging of his own death in the university dormitory in order to "punish" those students who teased him for his effeminate behavior and rejected his attempts to become friends. He carried his prank so far that emergency vehicles were summoned. This new information together with my observations of Joe during tutoring confirmed my belief that Joe needed special help that the Writing Center staff could not provide. I contacted the Dean of Students and the director of the Counseling Center, and they arranged for a psychiatrist to visit campus twice a week to meet with Joe. The last report was that the student was receiving medication to help control his mood swings and that he was continuing to attend therapy sessions.

The Writing Center staff had to identify Joe as a potential problem and then to guide him to appropriate channels where help was available. Fortunately, however, the university counseling staff often has already recognized troubled students and has involved them in counseling before they arrive at the Writing Center. In those cases it would seem that the tutors could try to focus on the students' writing deficiencies, but again that is not always easy when students have serious problems. Bob E. is a fine example of a student unable to resolve problems through counseling sessions. Bob, a handsome young man, was brain damaged in a car crash about three years ago. His ability to speak, to think, to write, and to use his limbs was impaired as a result of the accident. Immediately following the accident, Bob underwent intensive therapy to help him deal with his new condition; furthermore, he was involved in

counseling at the university at the time of his entry to the Writing Center. Bob had major difficulties with his writing, but he seemed unable to concentrate on them when he first began tutoring sessions. Instead, he focused his attention on his female tutor and used the two hours per week to flirt with her. It seemed likely that Bob had not dated since his accident and so was preoccupied with this void as evidenced by his constant attempts to steer conversations to personal and sexual matters during his appointments, and by his writing about his first girl friend and their first kiss. The tutor in this case was a reserved, gentle undergraduate who could not effectively deal with Bob's rather aggressive approach. To get Bob refocused on his writing, I switched him to a graduate tutor who could more forcefully direct his work. By their second meeting the new tutor's "drill sergeant" approach channeled Bob to work on his writing. His writing continued to improve throughout the semester, but his loneliness remained apparent.

Certainly there are many other problem students requiring special treatment: Darell who arrives intoxicated for his 9:00 a.m. appointments; Pam who is deaf but too proud to accept extra help from Handicap Services; Jerry who according to his tutor is a "powder keg always on the brink of exploding"; Tom who has nystagmus, cannot see his handwriting, yet his affluent parents refuse to purchase the glasses he needs,--and the list goes on. A writing center staff needs to be sensitive to the various problems of students. Although we train tutors to help students with their writing deficiencies rather than with their personal problems, we should not ignore those problems when they interfere with students' health or academic performance. We have a professional duty to try to refer students to those offices which offer help designed for their specific needs. In addition, a writing center staff can provide help by being understanding and supportive of troubled students. Psychologists suggest that helpful people such as tutors can have useful effects on students with problems. Jeffrey Shapiro and Therese Voog believe that "training may not be necessary for some inherently helpful persons to have a positive effect on the mental status of those with whom they interact" (505). Allen Bergin agrees, claiming that some clients in psychotherapy experience "spontaneous improvement" by using

someone (usually a friend or nonprofessional) as he would his counselor. If that person has understanding and warmth, then a disturbed individual who spends time with him will be helped (238).

Students are not the only ones who receive benefits from a supportive atmosphere in a writing center. Psychiatrist Frank Riessman points out in his "Helper" Therapy Principle that the people providing help are benefiting from their role (27). As most writing center directors have probably observed, tutors working in a teaching context profit greatly from the cognitive development associated with learning through teaching. In short, tutors need to learn the material thoroughly in order to teach it. Additionally, tutors can benefit from their roles as understanding peers. Riessman emphasizes that many people receive great satisfaction from giving and helping--what he calls "mothering" (31). In fact, tutors may experience improved self-images as a result of their doing something they feel is worthwhile in helping students in need (30).

If tutors are to feel confident rather than anxious about dealing with problem students and extraordinary situations, writing center directors need to prepare them for the challenges. At the beginning of each school year it would be valuable to include a discussion of crisis intervention as part of the training procedure. Tutors need to realize that it will not be unusual to have to work with a few students each semester who may display bizarre behavior. Directors could distribute to the tutors sample papers from troubled students to help facilitate the discussion. Furthermore, returning tutors who have worked with students during crises might share their experiences with the novices. If the university Guidance and Counseling Center is willing to cooperate, it would also be helpful for their representative to talk briefly with tutors about the available services. What should be emphasized most during training, though, is that tutors should immediately inform the writing center director if they discover students with unusual or even disruptive behavior. Directors also ought to reassure the tutors that reporting unusual behavior is a part of their professional responsibility rather than a failure to handle a difficult situation on their own. In one unfortunate case, I learned near the end of a semester that one of my

graduate tutors was terrified of one of her male students and had dreaded the tutoring sessions. I had read all of the student's papers and the tutor's comments in his folder, but there were no clues to problems. When I asked the tutor why she had not informed me of her difficulty, she explained that she thought her fear was unprofessional and that to turn the problem over to someone else would have been a failure to complete her duties. Tutors and directors alike must realize the worth of specialization and thus not hesitate to seek help for troubled students from the experts.

Once tutors inform their supervisors of the presence of a troubled student, supervisors should analyze the situation and make decisions about how to proceed. My procedure begins with a reading of the student's writing, then an observation of the student and tutor at work, followed by a conference in which the tutor and I discuss problems and make plans to help the student. From my reading of student papers I sometimes know in advance of the tutoring sessions that tutors may have some difficulty dealing with certain topics. When students write about sensitive personal matters--Joe's loneliness, Mary's tendency to abuse her daughter, Ed's anger at his mother--I advise tutors to treat the topics foremost as rhetorical problems. To do this, tutors think about how students can best organize and express the events to communicate with an outside audience. By using jargon such as thesis statement, supporting details, paragraph development, and so on, tutors can discuss loneliness as the subject matter to be developed in a paper rather than as the condition of the writer.

When a tutor is dealing with a difficult student, I observe the tutoring session to make an assessment, and then I discuss the situation with the tutor. Several things are important to notice about the student: any excessive behavior such as anger or depression, the inability to concentrate, the reaction to the tutor, and so forth. Similarly, useful information also comes from observing the tutor. It may be that the tutor is uncomfortable with a student and his problem and, therefore, contributes to the ineffectiveness of a work session. Or, she may be using techniques that will not be successful with that particular student. Of course, more often the tutor is performing an excellent job under trying circumstances. A conference between tutor

and supervisor following the observation is important so that the tutor can receive insights about how she handled the tutoring session and in some cases so that she can contribute insight about how to deal with the student's problem. While tutors ought to feel free to provide information leading to referrals, they ought not to be burdened with the actual decision-making process. It is the supervisor rather than the tutor who must decide whether to refer a student for special help.

Although directors make the decisions about whether to refer students for help, it may be useful in some situations for the tutors rather than the directors to broach the topic with students. The tutors, after all, have regular interaction with students while many directors know students only through readings of their writings and from tutors' reports. Educational guidance and counseling personnel have found that peers are an important influence. Nancy Schlossberg states that "more chance for influence and change exists if the influence agent is a familiar figure rather than a distant agent (110)." William Brown concurs with the peer approach for "peer-delivered information and advice frequently receives readier acceptance . . . than does the counsel given by teachers" (816).

When tutors are to facilitate referrals, tutors and directors will have discussed the referrals and the best methods for approaching particular students prior to the tutoring sessions so that tutors will feel confident about their techniques. Students who appear to be willing to accept help and with whom tutors already have good rapport are good choices for tutor assistance with referrals. One technique is for the tutor to complete a rhetorical discussion of a paper. Then, at the end of the session the tutor indicates to the student the opportunities available on campus for help with the specific problem mentioned in the paper, and the tutor also encourages the student to take advantage of the opportunities. Here the tutor plays the role of resource person in much the same way that college personnel programs use upperclassmen to help orient freshmen to university services. Tutors and directors should familiarize themselves with various university student assistance resources: guidance and counseling centers, crisis hotlines, veterans affairs offices, health centers, services for the physically challenged, women's crisis centers, learning

resource centers and so on.

I am not suggesting that writing center staff become pseudo-psychiatrists or psychological detectives prying into students' private lives. We do not have to pry; many students bare their souls through writing--perhaps because they are working out problems or perhaps because they are reaching out for help. In either case, English teachers and tutors, more so than those in other disciplines, learn about student problems, so our responsibility is great to help where we can. And we must not underestimate the valuable assistance tutors provide. They can be the human link that unites isolated and troubled students with the professional assistance which will help to ease their crises and permit them to return to their educational goals.

Elaine Ware  
Middle Tennessee State  
University

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# The Tutor's Corner

## VOICES FROM MT. HOLYOKE'S WRITING CENTER

When peer tutors in Mount Holyoke College's Writing Center were asked to describe their most challenging on-the-job experience, they wrote the following paragraphs.

1. The most challenging task I encounter is helping students out of their confusion without becoming confused myself. When working on a paper which lacks logically and clearly developed ideas, I find myself hindered by my own difficulty in discerning the student's focus and the primary points supporting her argument. As the student's confusion usually lies in not having expressed her most important ideas and their significance, I have learned that the paper itself is not always the best guide to what the student wants to say. Rather, the student herself is the best source for determining the pertinent ideas. The quickest way to establish clarity is to have her articulate her thesis and key points.

Claudia Sanchez

2. I sometimes feel inadequate to the task of helping students who come to the Writing Center. It is hard to admit it when I don't know the answer to a question posed within the Writing Center's walls. Students seem to trust the judgment of staffers implicitly, a tendency which imposes upon writing assistants a sometimes uncomfortable responsibility. Still, pressure can be exhilarating, and I found that I could draw on inner resources of sense and rationality in determining an appropriate and helpful response.

The most valuable thing I have learned after one semester is that receiving criticism is an art just as offering it tactfully is an art. Noting students' reactions to various suggestions and remarks has helped me determine which types of comments are constructive and which are discouraging. As a writer, I often feel like an artist, independent and temperamental, and I recoil at anyone else's "red pen" attack on my work. In the course of the semester, I think I have come to grips with

the reciprocity of criticism. There is no harm, only benefit, in letting someone else help you to be the best you can be.

Camilla Foltz

3. The student came in with a long paper which she wanted me to "just quickly look over" for mistakes. It's next to impossible to look over a paper quickly, especially one written by an ESL student, but how could I tell her that? We started reading over the paper together so that I could get a feel for what types of things were most obviously problems for her, but there were so many grammatical errors that it was easy to get caught up in them. Contrary to my original intention, we ended up dealing with the many little details rather than concentrating on a few of her more glaring problems.

In the limited time should I isolate one or two paragraphs, dealing in depth with the errors made in them and then expect her to find and correct similar mistakes in other paragraphs? Would she be able to find them on her own? Or should I concentrate on one or two paragraphs but then continue quickly through the rest of the paper, marking the problem sentences for her to go back to later? Doing this would at least help her know where her errors lay, if not exactly what the nature of the problem was. We tried this method for a while, but though she could sometimes discover her mistakes, I came upon many other instances in which she could not. I found myself becoming more and more frustrated at the abundance of technical mistakes and her inability to identify the errors. I did gain a little bit of experience in working on this kind of paper, however, and realized there was no way to attack all the problems in the limited time allowed for the session. In the future I would concentrate on selected paragraphs or selected problems within a paper.

Jennifer Smith

4. As a Women's Studies major and a feminist, I am interested in the politics of

our work at the Writing Center, an aspect which is particularly clear at a women's college. Yesterday one of my regular tutees mentioned a discussion of women and language in her introductory Women's Studies class, and I thought: this is what makes our work a feminist project. Helping young women to use the language efficiently and with confidence, to master their material, to put themselves in charge of their writing, is political action. Almost every student who comes in, I think, needs to be encouraged to make an argument of her own, to understand that it is this self-assertion that will make her work vital for herself and for her readers. Being in a position to give this encouragement is the aspect of my job which gives me the most satisfaction because it is of such great political value.

Teresa Renaker

5. One night a young black woman came in with a composition for rewriting. She looked bright but defensive; she had, I thought, ideas, habits of observation or manners that had often been challenged. The assignment was simple: to describe some scene or event from childhood. Dutifully, I read the essay and found a vivid picture of a decaying playhouse in the deserted grounds of a mansion of the Old South. The first paragraph began with some Southern idioms. At the bottom, and throughout the body, a professor had written "grammar sloppy." She waited patiently for my training to sort itself out. Finally, I could only tell her that "grammar" is only a part of language. The grammar of colleges and the New York Times, which is occasionally mistaken for a universal standard of correctness by those who use and teach it, is not the grammar of the rural South. Describing her home in academic language, she was right to sense, would be sterile and false. Her language was wrong for a critical essay on Milton; it was not wrong for this assignment. The problem remained, however, of the "improving rewrite." I suggested that she might illustrate the "rightness" of her grammar choices most effectively by re-writing it in University Language and letting her professor see for herself both her ability to use University grammar when necessary, and her greater ability--to see language as a form of expression.

Elizabeth Huyck

Convergences: Transactions in Reading and Writing. Ed. Bruce Petersen. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986. \$15.50 (NCTE members' price, \$12). 272 pages. Stock No. 08563.

Grasping meaning from reading and making meaning through writing are seen by researchers today as aspects of the same process. In this collection of articles, proponents of this transactional view explain how these new insights can be applied to teaching writing. The aim is to help teachers at all levels demystify for students the process of comprehending what they read and conveying their own thoughts on paper. For example, the lead essay discusses ways to help students become efficient readers of their own writing while another essay by a former writing lab tutor explains how, through planned questioning, teachers (or tutors) can demonstrate how reflective thinkers study a text, predict what should come next, and perceive patterns of reasoning. Because these and other essays in Convergences offer useful reading for writing lab tutors, this book belongs on the resource shelf for tutors to browse through.

Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching. George Hillocks, Jr. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986. \$24.75 (NCTE members' price, \$19). 369 pages. Stock No. 40750.

How should writing be taught today? What works? What doesn't and why? Is this long-awaited report George Hillocks, Jr., presents the results of a major effort to pin down answers from research to these urgent questions. His survey of selected research done over the last twenty-three years covers various approaches to writing instruction: aspects of the "writer's repertoire" of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical forms; invention; and various types of feedback to the writer. Hillocks' findings call in question the value of free writing and of teachers' comments on student papers. But, he concludes, feedback is most needed during the writing process and can be offered by peers, conclusions obvious to those of us in writing labs accustomed to working with students during the writing process. While some may argue his conclusion that none of the studies he reviewed provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composing skills, Hillocks' book is a valuable survey of what research does--and does not--tell us about how to teach writing.

ONE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER:  
LOOKING BACK AFTER THE FIRST YEAR

At the beginning of the 1984 school year, a group of juniors and seniors from Highland Park High School approached me with the idea of starting a "writing club." When I explained what I had learned about writing centers at the Denver NCTE Convention, they became enthusiastic, and began training to be peer tutors in the spring, meeting twice a month for two hours in the evening. These original ten volunteers opened the writing center in October, 1984. A second group of six, trained in a new course called "Writing and Responding," began as tutors in late November. In early June, we all had a positive attitude and a lot of ideas for the future.

Then, on the last day of school, I opened The Albadome, the 1985 Highland Park High School yearbook, and felt the first wave of dismay as I skimmed an article entitled, "Things We Never found Out," a display of off-handed senior sarcasm:

Why is there a windmill on top of the automotive building? Why were Mr. Klimowicz's classes always cancelled? By the way, does anyone ever use the guidance resource library? Has anyone ever learned anything or received any help in the writing center?

Flipping the pages, I came to another article, "Two Casualties . . . the Literary Centers." Here an omniscient voice bemoaned the little effort put into the school's literary magazine, Dead Center, and insisted that the writing center too was a failure because "the tutors had little opportunity to try their trade--few people came to the writing center." Is the yearbook portraying the writing center as the victim of some vague catastrophe, slumped in a library chair, smiling wanly in spite of bandages and broken limbs, waiting in vain for a visitor? Is this a common belief?

It is now a month later. I have regained my former confidence, because my conclusions about the writing center's first year are different from those of the Albadome. These conclusions are based on three sources: my own general impressions and those of the tutors; data from records we kept; and the results of an end-of-the-year survey.

I am very aware of the difficulties we

faced all year long. Perhaps the biggest was lack of broad faculty support. While a few teachers consistently sent students, most ignored the writing center and some even discouraged their students from visiting. We also had problems with tutors. A few failed to show up just at those times when a tutee was waiting. Two overly zealous seniors showed bad judgment and frightened an already timid eighth grader. Some failed to keep accurate records, and some were poorly matched with particular tutees. Finally, our location in the library was sometimes a problem. It took the librarians a while to understand what the writing center was about and to figure out their role in relation to the tutors.

On the whole, however, I believe we had quite a successful first year. As a group, the tutors displayed an enthusiasm, a sense of responsibility, a flexibility, and a depth of insight and understanding that surpassed my early expectations. I have learned so much from these teenagers, about writing, about teaching, and about mutual respect. They insisted on staffing the center more periods than I originally requested; they even made their own arrangements to tutor students at times the center was closed. They kept the school hallways covered with colorful fliers and posters. And they demonstrated their growing commitment to writing by bringing their own work, both teacher-assigned and self-generated, to each other for feedback. Most of all, however, I was impressed by the tutors' increasing ability to respond effectively and sensitively to student writing as revealed during our continuing training sessions and conferences. Other teachers have praised the high quality of response, and two who took their own writing to tutors expressed great pleasure with the results.

The tutors have their own versions of our first-year problems:

I feel like I'm not really using all of my training. I have never had the chance to help someone brainstorm, etc. Usually I am merely looking at next-to-last copies. I also think our school has trouble accepting a gradeless environment. Students don't come with a desire to do "good writing" but with some sort of grade or teacher in mind.

We need more ventilation and decoration. As it is, the center isn't overwhelmingly attractive. It huddles in its corner, passively waiting to be visited.

Do people really care enough about their writing to come?

The kids are sometimes not serious, and it's hard to tutor your friends when they jerk around.

People regard the center as a place where high-ego tutors teach dummy tutees "how to write." (Most would rather spend free periods in the cafeteria or roaming the halls). The center itself is not that way at all, and I believe the problem stems from the low priority of writing on most high school teachers' lists.

The biggest complaint is about the relatively low use by student writers:

The main aspect of the writing center which is obvious to me is the lack of students coming to it. Period after period I have sat in that esteemed cavern, waiting for the great tutee to come. Instead of responding to students about structure and theme, I respond to physics problems.

Nevertheless, this student goes on to describe the benefits of his peer-tutoring experiences:

On the few occasions I do have a student to tutor, it is quite a different picture. I feel that the writing center is valuable to these students in that it gives them some useful response and confidence in their writing. It helps me to communicate with people, feel I'm helping other people and myself, and it teaches me the value of patience.

Other tutors are similarly pleased with their first year and express their sense of personal growth:

This training and responding experience has helped me with my own writing. I have been able to tutor myself to a certain extent. I can look at my own work more objectively. I know when I need more work, even if I am not always able to come up with "the" final correct piece.

It helps me acknowledge problems that others have and I can try and avoid them myself. I can also understand and relate to people more.

I've enjoyed my experience as a tutor because I get a feeling of satisfaction that I'm helping students to improve their writing process and perceptions about writing.

The wc has caused me to write on my own, which is something I had never done seriously before--not that it should be a serious business, but at least I've acknowledged my interest and followed up on it.

When I first sat down in the writing center, I was really worried that I would have nothing of importance to say. After some of the tutoring sessions, I've felt that I had some general impact on the papers.

Our records are also encouraging. The log reveals 185 different sessions handled by the 14 tutors, not an insignificant number for the first year in a school with 650 students. Also, though most of the papers brought to the center were assigned by English teachers, some students brought lab reports, history papers, and home-ec projects.

Finally, the results of a survey taken in June, 1985, are overwhelmingly positive. Fifty students out of 182 randomly surveyed had visited the writing center. When asked to evaluate their experience, they responded as follows:

Do you feel that the help you received was clear and effective?

- unclear and ineffective: 17%
- adequate: 27%
- very clear and effective: 56%

Do you feel that the tutors were helpful and competent?

- not helpful: 17%
- adequate: 15%
- very helpful: 68%

Do you feel that what you learned enabled you to write a better paper?

no progress: 17%  
some progress: 39%  
much progress: 44%

The adjectives most frequently checked by visitors were "helpful" (25), "rewarding" (10), "comfortable" (21), "friendly" (32), and "encouraging" (20), as opposed to "waste" (3), "frustrating" (5), "intimidating" (5) and "discouraging" (3). Forced to increase their awareness of a reader's needs, these students believed they had improved most in their ability to focus, organize and develop ideas.

Whoever wrote those Albadome articles is right: we need more clients. And the source obviously is teachers. In answer to the question "Have your teachers encouraged you to bring your writing to the wc?" the survey reveals that eighth grade teachers are the strongest supporters, a fact that bodes well for the wc's future; eighth graders who had a positive experience last year are likely to return. (25 out of the 63 who answered the survey came to the wc-- almost 40%). This year we must convince teachers to send upper-class-people, who have a tendency toward complacency, as revealed in this senior's answer to one of the survey's open-ended questions:

As far as I can see, all or most of the tutors are less competent than I am. This entire project is useless to anyone with better than remedial writing skills or anyone devoid of friends.

Teachers of such students must stress that the writing center is not a remedial place, but a source of intelligent, supportive feedback and dialogue. At the same time, teachers of 8th and 9th graders need to recognize and overcome younger students' fears:

I didn't go because I was afraid of the tutors.

I don't like strangers to see my work. I can't talk to guys easily and I never knew who the tutors were.

I haven't gone more often cause I think my papers are stupid and I'll be laughed at.

I think the person might really hate my paper and think I can't write at all.

I am no longer so discouraged by the Albadome's label of "casualty." If I knew who wrote those articles, I would send him/her/them the following student comments:

It was good for me. The girl I worked with was very helpful and encouraging. I can't suggest anything.

I like the wc the way it is. I don't think they should change it at all. I was scared to go at first because I was afraid the tutor would think my paper sucked, but she was very understanding.

I think it's great.

At first it was scary. I thought he/she would laugh at my paper but he was very friendly and it gave me confidence to go back.

I think that so far you have done all possible. I think it will take time for the writing center to establish itself. Maybe the writing center could publish a magazine that could include things submitted and/or worked on in the writing center. That might show the school that Hey! Look! There's a lot of people interested in writing. It really is a cool thing to do.

Far from being a "casualty," the Highland Park High School Writing Center seems to have had a pretty good start. It deserves a lot more nurturing as it attempts to become more of an integral part of students' lives.

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WRITE 'EM A LETTER

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They get letters from home, notes from the Registrar, notices of library fines, love letters, dun letters, Dean letters, promo pieces from pizza parlors, but do they get letters from you? If not, I suggest you write an occasional letter to your students. Add letter-writing to your list of ploys to use to bond your students to you and to

writing.

My own letters to students have varied according to individual situations. There's the note on a University post card: Hey, you've not been in class this week. Are you ill? Had an accident? Family problem? You've been doing good work, so I'd hate to see you drop the class. Let me know your problem; come and see me.

There's the paper I did not get back on time: With a short apology accompanying comments on the writing. And I always ask the student to bring the paper and comments to our next conference.

There's the occasional tragedy that keeps a student away: That you can handle with an appropriate commercial card. If the student is known in class, I may pass it around for class members to sign.

There's the missed assignment: (I usually put each student's name on any handout assignment sheet, so I know who got a sheet and who didn't.) Just requires an inforamatory sentence. Usually saves me from getting late work.

There's the clipping, university form, or other item that I know interests the student.

Etc.

Writing such notes and letters is good for the writer. He or she must always ask, "What is the professional reason for this communication?" No letter should contain any hint of a possible relationship other than that of teacher/student, classroom business.

Fallout from notes and letters is almost always good. Lost souls usually reappear, call, or reply with an explanation. Some students just say, "Thanks for the letter." Most exclaim, "Gee, I never got a letter from a teacher before. I really appreciate it." And we go on from there.

It works. Try it.

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