

The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NWCA:NCTE
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. X, No. 9
(May 1986)

It's often noted how diverse writing labs are and how they resist classification. In this month's newsletter this diversity is extended even further as one writing lab director explains why he seeks heterogeneity in selecting his tutors, another director suggests that planning before you act may not be the best principle in starting a lab, and two other directors argue for opposing positions in the question of publishing student errors. Perhaps writing labs are inhabited by people who resist tidy classifications and uniformity. After all, who else could thrive in a teaching situation where their students constantly change from hour to hour and week to week or where the best laid plans for a tutorial are continually altered in response to the student's progress?

Yet we all benefit from each other's experience. So keep sending your articles, reviews, announcements, questions, responses, names of new members, and yearly \$5 donations (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

STARTING A WRITING LAB: AN ARGUMENT FOR HASTE

Although opening a writing lab can be a difficult and time-consuming project, many of the problems and much of the time can become part of the daily operations of a functioning lab, rather than obstacles to be overcome before the lab opens. Our experience at New Mexico Highlands University has shown us that benefits derive from opening a lab as soon as possible. We had no choice but to accept the budget offered us, though we did have the option of denying the students our services until we had all the

requisites for a "successful" lab firmly in hand. We did not take that option, and I hope that the following outline of our approach might convince those who hesitate about opening a lab to consider the possibility that haste does not necessarily make waste, and that, in the case of starting a lab, it might even be the best approach.

Step One: A Faculty Survey. We needed to find out if the faculty of Highlands would use a writing lab were we to establish one. Toward this end, a faculty member who decided to quit "talking" and start "doing" composed a six-page questionnaire asking faculty members about the kind and severity of writing problems encountered in student papers, and whether they would use a writing lab to help solve these problems.

This questionnaire was sent to each teaching member of the University staff. Though we had been warned that we should not expect a large response to our questions, a surprising one-third of the faculty members answered. We gained some important information from this questionnaire, and the most valuable was that the faculty agreed to send students to us for assistance. Were we to take this step again, we would make the questionnaire shorter, including more multiple choice questions (rather than those asking for written responses) so we could attract a larger faculty response and reduce the time between question and answer.

Step Two: Initial Approval. We wished to find out, in the shortest time possible, what the administration needed in order to be convinced that our school would benefit from a writing lab. We assumed that a direct, verbal approach would be the quickest: two English Department members asked the Division Chair, the Chair asked the Academic Dean, the Dean asked the President. Everyone up the line said, "Yes, we want and need a lab. Start planning." In one day, we had our approval and saved ourselves the time of writing, copying, and sending memos and letters. And we saved the time and expense of doing a detailed "feasibility

study."

Step Three: Staff Funding. This might be the most difficult step, but funding can be achieved in stages. We went first to the people on campus who were already financing English instruction. Because of the poor timing of our request, the English Department had few dollars not already earmarked for the next semester. However, our Special Services Director not only offered to "give" us the half-time tutor she was already funding, but offered to finance one-fourth of an instructor's time to direct the Lab. The next semester the English Department also offered one-quarter time for a director and a few-hours-a-week tutor. So, after seventeen weeks of operation, we had a half-time director and two tutors. This was not what we wanted or needed, especially the first semester, but it was enough for us to open our doors and offer some services.

Step Four: Supplementing the Staff. This, for us, was probably the easiest step. We knew we had no money to offer, so I simply wrote a letter to the English Department faculty asking for volunteers. I argued that they would be helping themselves in the long run by supporting the Lab in its early, lean days, and I suggested that since they scheduled three or more office hours a week, they might spend one of those hours in the Lab; their own students would become familiar with the location and facilities of the Lab, and any time they did not need for their own students could be used for Lab clients. My request brought responses from four teachers who donated five hours a week. We did not (and still do not) have enough graduate assistants to assign one to the Lab, but again, asking for volunteers should get results: lab experience looks good on a graduate student's record and is excellent training for teaching English composition.

Step Five: Finding Physical Properties. A writing lab needs desks, chairs, file cabinets, books, bookshelves, and a host of other equipment. Part of this--a desk, bookshelves, and a file cabinet--came from the English Department as a half-time faculty member's due. The Department also contributed a phone and hook-up, and the typewriter was a personal loan from a faculty member. The books came from the collections of the English faculty and from publishers' samples; the chalkboard came from a dusty corner of the History Department's map room. We gained another desk

when our secretary replaced her old one with one large enough to hold her new computer. In short, while we had no budget for equipment, we begged and borrowed, in two weeks, enough to begin helping students, and we continue to add to our "inventory."

Step Six: Finding a Home. We did not concern ourselves initially with the complexities of the ideal physical location and lay-out of a lab. We were willing to settle for something small and near-central, and that's what we got. We have three rooms (not inter-connected) in the Humanities office building, a few steps from the Division Chair and the English faculty offices. We set one office aside for tutoring, one for writing, and one (my office) as a room for reception, screening, record storage, book storage, and the day-to-day operation of the Lab. This was not (and still is not) ideal for a writing lab, but at least we had named and numbered rooms in a building familiar to the students--an "official" Writing Lab. We knew we would need more space, but we took what was available at the time in order to open as soon as possible.

Step Seven: Informing the Campus. Highlands is a small university, so I simply chose to write a letter and send a copy to every teacher and counselor on campus. This letter contained the Lab hours, Lab location, and a brief paragraph describing the "theory" of our Lab--what we could offer and how we offered it. I send a version of this original letter each semester, reasoning that it cannot hurt to remind people, faculty and student alike, that lab help is available. I try to word the letter so it sounds as if I am addressing a colleague on a matter of mutual concern, but word it too so that it can be read to a class verbatim if the instructor does not want to take time to "edit." With one day for typing and reproduction and one day for distribution, all the instructors and most of the students knew of the Lab two days after we opened and are reminded of our existence two days after each new semester starts.

Step Eight: Open, Learn, Plan, Expand. Five months after we decided to start a lab, and three months after the administration gave its initial approval, we opened our doors to students. Had we waited for a bigger library of workbooks, we would have waited another six months. Had we waited for computers, we would have waited another

year. And had we waited for a full-time director, we would still be waiting. Our experience has shown that by taking anything from any source, we could open quickly, lobby for more money or scout the campus for a better location, and at the same time help students improve their writing skills.

I believe there is an argument for this low-budget, as-soon-as-possible approach to starting a lab. We had the opportunity to judge from experience what our students and faculty needed and expected of us. We found, for example, that our assumption about rooms was correct--ours is a poor arrangement for a lab, and we learned that word processing could be an important addition to the services we offer. It might have been the other way around, though; had we gone for the biggest and best at the outset, we could be left with wasted room and idle computers. Only by opening quickly and with an absolute minimum budget were we able to discover the advantages and disadvantages of our current arrangements.

We have been open a full year now and have two plans for expanding the Lab physically, we have a budget to double our library of handbooks and workbooks, and we have a budget for five word processors. And though we do not have a budget for a larger staff and a full-time director, we will continue to work on these problems as we continue to help students with theirs.

Gregory Dickson
New Mexico Highlands
University
Las Vegas, NM

ON SELECTING PEER TUTORS: LET'S HEAR IT FOR HETEROGENEITY

While procedures for the selection and training of peer tutors vary from writing center to writing center and are, to an extent, dependent upon each center's circumstances and needs, Deborah Arfken (112) has noted that certain academic qualifications and personal characteristics--e.g. a B average or better in English courses and good interpersonal skills, to name the two most obvious ones--tend to be consistently sought after by writing center directors. Furthermore, because "only the most competent" students should be selected

as peer tutors, Arfken recommends that nominations should be "solicited . . . from the English faculty, the education department, and their respective student-majors committees" (111). This advice is consistent with Elizabeth Bell's recent observation in these pages that "traditionally, most peer tutors have been either English or English education majors" (10).

But the qualities and characteristics that make a good peer tutor do not reside solely--or even primarily--with students in these two majors. And good writing is not, indeed should not, be the concern only of the English department. In the belief, then, that a certain heterogeneity among our peer tutors would make for a more interesting, more productive writing center experience for all involved, at Monmouth College we have broken with tradition. And we are delighted with the results.

Our criteria for selecting peer tutors are similar to most programs: Prospective peer tutors must possess good writing skills; they are required to have at least a 3.0 grade-point average and to consistently do B or better work in courses requiring writing; we want them to be mature and responsible; and we are convinced that a good sense of humor is crucial.

Unlike many other writing centers, however, we actively seek out--and are now sought out by--prospective peer tutors from majors all across the curriculum. Of course we welcome English majors and their special skills and insights. But recent cadres of tutors have also included majors from such non-traditional areas as computer science, computer applications in business, foreign languages, accounting, history, theater, marketing, social work, and medical technology. In fact, last year one of our tutors was carrying a double major: philosophy and math.

This heterogeneity has had, and continues to have, two important consequences for the Writing Center: an increased sense of camaraderie among our tutors, and, lately, an increasing willingness on the part of instructors in disciplines other than English to refer their students to the Center.

Our mixed bag of tutors brings to our community of writers a diversity of

interests and backgrounds as well as a diversity of writing experiences. And though each receives the same training, each brings to the tutoring situation his own, and his discipline's, special insights. As a result, the Writing Center is imbued with a special, richer atmosphere, one that tutors find particularly rewarding both academically and personally. Moreover, the give and take at staff meetings is freer, more helpful. For example, a communications major understands the dynamics of the one-to-one tutoring situation one way, a social work major another. And our computer science majors frequently observe that for them, the personal intimacy of the one-to-one experience is a refreshing, even needed change from hours of interacting only with a computer terminal. Shared experiences thus become shared knowledge.

Unlike situations that can very often exist in a student's major department, there is little competition between tutors and no need for pretense, for seeming to "know it all." Since each tutor has in a sense his or her own area of expertise, there is no embarrassment at asking each other, or the Director, for suggestions or advice. Tutors are also more willing to share their own work with each other, thereby refining and extending their skills both as writers and as tutors.

There exists among our mixed bag a strong sense of loyalty to the Center. While they spend a lot of time "hanging out" in their major departments, as our history major said recently, the feeling is that "This is our home too." And so such activities as the end-of-semester/pre-exam Trivial Pursuit party and the annual Christmas-Hanukkah Party have become traditions and add to the Center's sense of community. And a sense of community, Judith Fishman maintains, "as intangible and immeasurable as it is . . . is the center of a successful writing lab" (87).

Our tutors are able to become closer to their tutees as well. Accurately or not, fairly or not, English majors are often perceived by students in other areas as being either eggheads or flakes, as somehow perceiving the world a little differently than everyone else. Bum rap though this may be, it is true that an upperclass English major can be a bit intimidating to the freshman basic writing student, for example.

Our mixed bag of tutors, though, are more

approachable, more easily identified with. Hence, the writing skills that our tutors possess--which are every bit as good as those of the English major--seem to be more attainable to the basic writing student. Furthermore, the basic writer learns that a concern for good writing, and the need for good writing, exists in all departments, not just in English.

While the relationship between the Monmouth College Writing Center and the English department has always been--thankfully--a close and mutually supportive one, the same has not always been the case with other departments. Indeed, despite advertising, proselytizing, and occasional pleading, the rest of the college has been a bit slow in effectively utilizing the Writing Center. Now however, this is beginning to change. And it is another benefit of heterogeneity.

Because they are coming to realize that there exists a trained cadre of writing tutors who are familiar with discourse demands in a variety of disciplines--and who are not only writing about such rarefied matters as, say, the use of water imagery in Joyce's *Ulysses*--faculty in other disciplines are beginning to refer more students to the Writing Center, confident that appropriate and effective help is available, and are beginning to incorporate more writing activities into their classes.

Finally, our mixed bag of tutors are wonderful ambassadors-at-large to the college community. Top students, active in their major departments, highly visible, they spread the Writing Center message around the campus and across the curriculum. One fascinating result has been that some faculty have begun to feel they have a personal stake in the Center's success. Faculty from Business, for example, who too long neglected the Writing Center, are showing a new interest in its operation and activities due in large measure to the fact that our most experienced tutor is one of their honor students. The chairperson of the History Department--long a crusader for literacy--is both pleased and proud that one of his most promising majors is one of our most effective tutors.

These are all important developments, not only for the Writing Center, but for tutors, for students, and for the college. Around the Monmouth College Writing Center, hetero-

geneity is what's happening.

Henry Luce
Monmouth College

Works Cited

Arfken, Deborah. "A Peer-Tutor Staff: Four Crucial Aspects." Tutoring Writing. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1982.

Bell, Elizabeth. "The Peer Tutor as Principal Benefactor in the Writing Center." Writing Lab Newsletter 9.9 (1985).

Fishman, Judith. "On Tutors, the Writing Lab, and Writing." Tutoring Writing. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1982.

MAKING THE COMPUTER WRITING CENTER A REALITY

Computers have been a fixture at Sterling High School for much of the past ten years. Like many other high schools in New Jersey, these computers have primarily fallen within the purview of the Mathematics and Business departments.

Application of this technology to other areas has been, however, somewhat limited, often for good reason. First, few staff members outside the mathematics and business areas have both the expertise and interest to make applications of this technology. Second, much of the commercially produced software for areas such as the humanities is of the drill and practice variety and offers little or no advantage over a textbook. Third, the far-flung dispersion of hardware severely limits student access.

Despite the obstacles noted, Sterling High School has developed and implemented a writing/computer center. We have been motivated by many factors including our school-wide goals in writing, the desire to

improve SAT scores, and personal experience with word processing.

Since 1983-84, improvement in writing has been one of our principal goals. We have fostered the growth of process writing both in the English department and across the entire school curriculum with a series of workshops, through the publication of a monthly writing bulletin and through close monitoring of student growth in writing by periodic sampling. For the most part we have been encouraged by the results. We have recognized as well that some students remained deficient despite these efforts.

In an attempt to meet the needs of these deficient students, a writing lab was proposed that would serve the remedial student. By sampling our incoming ninth grade class, we determined that some thirty percent of the students were either deficient or marginally deficient in writing. This became the primary focus of our rationale.

A writing lab could be implemented with paper, pencil and a creative teacher; but as this proposal was developed, we began to recognize the impact that word processing was having on our own writing and composition. We were philosophically committed to the concept of process writing, and we believed that word processing could further enhance it. An article by Gail Womble in the English Journal in early 1984 further encouraged us. Ms. Womble's students had access to one word processor in their regular English class. She concluded that students stayed longer with a piece of writing--adding, deleting, moving text because the physical act of effecting change was so much easier. Seeing what they had written on the screen also helped students determine what changes to make, and they found it easier to develop a sense of audience.

Besides the advantages that accrued to Ms. Womble's students as noted above, the word processor offers other benefits. It allows a teacher to keep a file of students' writing. It also allows both the teacher and the student to assess the growth in the quality of student writing over time. Software is being developed that directly addresses stages of the writing process such as Mimi Schwartz's Pre-Write program.

It became evident to us at Sterling that

the computer writing center had the potential to reach far more than just the remedial students. As our proposal evolved, we decided that the computer writing center should be made available to the entire student population.

Careful consideration was given to the type of computer, printer and word processing system that was to be purchased. Pre-eminent was the need for ease of operation. We wanted a system that would minimize the number of commands needed to begin writing. We also wanted a system that would allow us to take advantage of newly published software. We decided upon the Apple IIe double disk drive computer, Panasonic printers and the PFS WRITE word processing program.

Our goals for the 1985-86 school year were established as follows:

1. The writing/computer center will work with ninth grade students needing remediation.
2. The center will establish consistent operating procedures and hours.
3. The writing/computer center will serve to assist any student with any content area writing assignment during open hours of operation.
4. The center will be available to any staff member who has an interest in learning to use the word processor or other software.
5. The center will conduct formal workshops for the English department staff members.
6. The center will conduct formal in-class workshops for all grade 11 students and any other interested teachers and their classes.
7. The center will conduct free after-school SAT review workshops.
8. The center will monitor student usage throughout the year and measure the growth of remedial students, using writing samples.

After four months of operation, the computer/writing center has made a considerable impact on the students. We have estab-

lished consistent hours of operation. The center is available before school from 7:30 a.m. and after school until 4:00 p.m. The center is also available during three periods of every school day. At all times there is a teacher available in the room.

The English staff has had one formal workshop on usage of the computers. Interest was greatest among four of the five English staff members at grades eleven and twelve who began to use the center on a regular basis. These teachers have brought their students in to pre-write, draft, revise and edit on the word processors. Many of their students have returned before and after school to work on class assignments. Our log of student usage indicates that they are also returning to write papers for non-English courses, to prepare essays for college applications, to write for the school newspaper and to send personal letters to friends.

Much of our work with remedial students still lies ahead. We hope to schedule these students to work with the writing center staff during open periods in their schedule. This will allow them to come to the center at least once or twice a week during the school day. Only at year's end will we know if we have made some impact on their writing.

We are certainly encouraged by the progress that the computer writing center has made to date. Even in the space of a few months we have seen these advantages. Our students have been helped by a process that encourages revision without exacting excessive amounts of time for recopying. Second, the process of revising at the computer offers numerous opportunities for collaboration both with the teacher and with fellow students. One teacher designed a writing assignment just for that purpose. Third, students are spending far more time at the process than in the past.

We have come to agree with the notion that one of the optimal uses of computer technology in education is in the teaching of writing. The day may not be too distant when computers are used as effectively in the English classroom as they are in the Math classroom.

Joseph G. Serico
Sterling High School
Somerdale, NJ

The Tutor's Corner

IACOCCA'S MAGIC AND WRITING CENTER "SALES"

Lee Iacocca has made his mark in the auto industry by selling cars that fit the American public's wants and needs. In my three years as a tutor at Randolph-Macon College, I have found that Iacocca's business savvy applies as much to writing centers as it does to car sales.

Just as the Chrysler Corporation has made an incredible comeback from its disastrous decline, so too has Randolph-Macon's Writing Center. When I began tutoring as a sophomore, the center was tucked away in an English classroom and open at odd daytime hours while classes were in session. It essentially consisted of a table, a few chairs, a shelf of books, some impressive-looking but seldom-used audio cassettes, and a tutor--nothing more. Like Chrysler in 1978, The Writing Center needed a massive shot in the arm. I was lucky if I had one customer per week.

Unquestionably, drastic measures were needed to avert the pending academic bankruptcy of our Writing Center. A new director was charged with devising those measures, and in the Iacocca manner, he has completely redesigned the product with student needs in mind.

Thus, the new Writing Center is located in the more open and friendly surroundings of a dormitory apartment. Interior changes have enhanced the feeling of informality: comfortable furniture complements the standard table and chairs while curtains, pictures, and plants lend a final home-like touch.

A second major innovation has been the introduction of modern technology in the form of computers with word-processing programs. These computers provide increased speed and flexibility in typing, revising, and correcting papers. They will soon be essential to the center's effectiveness as the entire college moves ahead with a new computer literacy program. However, even

the student with no computer experience can profit from the new technology because Writing Center tutors are trained to give full word-processing guidance.

The Writing Center also has new hours which make it more accessible to students. It now opens Sunday through Thursday for three hours each night, on a walk-in basis. As these hours are prime studying time at Randolph-Macon, students are more likely to drop by the center for help if they encounter problems while writing their papers elsewhere.

Lastly, the new Writing Center even caters to smaller creature comforts by providing hot drinks and candy to customers--a final touch in creating a hospitable atmosphere.

The result of all these changes is an entirely new and marketable product which caught students' attention the year that it was introduced. Just as high-mileage cars with front-wheel drive helped to put Chrysler back on the road, the changes in The Writing Center have brought it back into the ranks of respectable centers and made it the co-host of this year's National Peer Tutor conference. Further evidence of success lies in the number of customers that we now serve: we see an average of five students per night out of a total student body of approximately 950 students, and some nights we see ten or more! And though some of this success may be attributed to increased publicity efforts, most of it is rooted in the nature of the product. The new Writing Center works because it gives students something they can use, an informal, comfortable, and accessible place where they can make their writing easier and better with the aid of fellow students and modern computer technology.

Michele J. Ports
Randolph-Macon College
Ashland, Virginia

SPREAD THE NEWS

Have you ever felt you were spending time attempting to solve problems that you were certain other developmental educators must have faced? Frequently, we spend precious time "re-inventing the wheel" when we could in fact profit from the experience of our colleagues. But . . . how do you gain access to that information?

In early 1984, the Professional Development Committee of the Michigan Chapter of the Mid-American Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel (MI-MAEOPP) discussed this problem. The members agreed that MI-MAEOPP had a great deal of experience to contribute to other associations and organizations interested in providing excellence and equity in education from an interdisciplinary view. (MAEOPP is the professional organization for those working in federally funded Special Programs for Disadvantaged Students--TRIO). For the last two decades, TRIO programs have developed strategies for meeting the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The results have been compiled in book form: Needs Assessment, Marketing and Evaluation Techniques in Michigan TRIO Programs and distributed to all members. Other interested groups (or individuals) may

obtain a copy of this valuable resource. Simply fill out the form below and enclose a check or money order for \$5.00 to cover the cost of printing and mailing to:

Dr. Loretta Church, Chair
MI-MAEOPP Professional Development
Committee
Kellogg Community College
450 North Avenue
Battle Creek, Michigan 49017

Composition/Rhetoric: A Synthesis. W. Ross Winterowd. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986. (362 pages, \$29.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper)

In the essays collected in this book, Winterowd moves easily among topics as diverse as brain theory, stylistics, or the impact of poststructuralism on the teaching of composition. "Practice without theory is sometimes destructive and always dangerous," he explains. "I have attempted to achieve a balance between theory and philosophy and application." He achieves this through two sections: "The Field of Composition/Rhetoric" and "Essays on Composition/Rhetoric." In the chapters on developing a composition program, he offers a distinction between his two scenes for instruction in writing: the writing workshop and the language skills laboratory, a distinction those of us in tutorial centers will find worth considering (even if we don't all agree).

New Directions in Composition Scholarship

A Conference to be held October 10, 11, 12, 1986
at the University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire

Featured Speakers:

Nancie Atwell, Robert J. Connors, Linda Flower, Donald Graves, Jerome Harste, Shirley Brice Heath, D.H. Knoblauch, Andrea Lunsford, Geoffrey Summerfield.

Scholars and researchers studying writing at different age levels are not always in touch with work being done outside their field of specialization. For this reason, issues and trends in composition research are sometimes considered in isolation. This conference brings together the whole context of scholarship in writing at all levels—from early elementary school through the college years. Speakers will examine new research directions from a number of perspectives, concentrating on theories and findings that seem most important to composition studies today and tomorrow.

In addition to the main speakers, there will be concurrent workshop and discussion sessions on a variety of related topics.

Conference Limited to 200 Participants

Pre-Registration Only:

Since both attendance and hotel accommodations are limited, registration should be completed by June 1, 1986.

The \$60 registration fee includes a Friday evening reception and a Sunday group brunch. To receive your packet of conference information, mail your fee (payable to The University of New Hampshire) to:

Robert J. Connors—Department of English
The University of New Hampshire—Durham, New Hampshire 03824

Comment and Response

A READER RESPONDS

(A response to the nomination for the Outstanding Grammar Error of 1985, in the Writing Lab Newsletter, March 1986)

How ethical is publishing student writing errors in professional journals, department newsletters, bulletin boards or English lounges? When we extract errors from our students' compositions, submit them to be published for--who knows?--to read, and then vote on how loudly they make us laugh, we are in fact congratulating a student for being the faultiest writer who can make the funniest grammatical mistake.

What is particularly disturbing about Michael Chiteman's contribution is that the student, it appears, enrolled in a Freshman English class (a struggle in itself), perhaps within the Academic Services division, was asked to write an essay, in standard English, to be graded, on a sensitive, personal topic--the trauma of moving. Facing all these obstacles, the student was able to call on and put heartfelt feelings into writing, and we, complete strangers, ridicule his grammatical mistakes.

Granted, by publishing writing errors, we may be sharing an appreciation of the infinite possibilities of the English language. Granted, we may also be acknowledging our students' accidental creativity. And granted, we may reap some cathartic benefit: we have to laugh when we teach Freshman English, otherwise we would cry.

But could we also be reaping a revengeful chuckle from students who have to struggle with the English language?

I propose that we do away with the Outstanding Grammar Error of 1985 contest. Why not publish the best sentences from our students' essays?

Jacqueline Lauby
Francis Marion College
Florence, SC

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR LAUBY

Obviously, there was never any intention to ridicule the student. Quite the contrary. He is to be congratulated for overcoming the type of grammatical error presented. I would never have submitted the error otherwise.

Included among the discoveries I've made in eighteen years of teaching freshman composition are these:

1) Beginning composition is, in my opinion, the most important course a college freshman undertakes. No other course--no math, no accounting--asks him to examine the logic inherent in his personal, written expression or to scrutinize the mechanical accuracy of that expression. We, as composition instructors, must be sensitive to this highly personal relationship between the freshman and his writing. I would suggest that anyone seriously "reaping a revengeful chuckle" should leave the profession.

2) Nonetheless, it is easier for the freshman, perhaps for all of us, to discover logical, stylistic, or grammatical inaccuracies in the writing of his peers. Just as good writing teaches, so does below-average writing. The freshman must examine and evaluate large doses of both!

Until the student produced the sentence in question, no number of exercises or explanations allowed him to see that he was creating the possessive case in place of simple plurals. Thus house became house's, parent became parent's. His own sentence, with the image it invoked, finally opened that door to understanding. He laughed and I laughed with him, not at him.

Finally, I would hope that we can, indeed, laugh when we teach freshman writing. But we should never, never cry. We are teaching these young men and women to think clearly, to communicate effectively. There is no sadness in that achievement.

Michael D. Chiteman
Penn State-Behrend

ORIENTING THE STUDENT AND SETTING THE AGENDA IN A DROP-IN WRITING CENTER

Because students spend most of their lives attending school, they feel comfortable in the classroom setting. Because of years of experience, they perceive appropriate classroom behavior. In recent years, however, the writing center has become an increasingly common learning institution at the college level and is making inroads in the public school system. Because writing centers are a relatively new institution, and neither the faculty at large nor students are familiar with either the true nature of its services or of writing center etiquette, it isn't surprising that the adventuresome student who comes to this new and strange environment produces occasions of human fireworks.

With an acknowledgment that the human is a complex being (so that every student must be treated as an individual) and that my categories are uncomplimentary and caricatures, let me group students who come to the writing center into four groups: the normal learner who comes from curiosity, the hostile learner, the apathetic learner, and the manipulator. These categories are appropriate because most come for assistance because of simple curiosity, because their teacher required that they come, or because of false expectations. But while they come with not the best of motives, a skillful tutor can modify that false stance and lead most of them to a fruitful learning experience.

For most students it is a new experience, and most expect or hope for the maximum assistance possible. These false expectations and hopes are a challenge to the tutor. While the tutor naturally wants to assist as much as possible, faculty and administration have established conservative perimeters. Some faculty members don't support the writing center because they perceive writing center services as an arena of writing collaboration. The tutor has a responsibility to distinguish in his own thinking and to communicate to the student the distinction between writing collaboration and learning collaboration, with the emphasis in the writing center, of course, being focused on collaborative learning. It is my thesis that this distinction should be communicated to the student during the first three to five minutes of the student's first visit to the writing center. While acci-

dents do happen--some remarkably successful tutoring sessions result from an undisciplined approach--well defined goals reached by mutual agreement between tutor and student in that initial three to five minutes will maximize the possibility of quality tutoring and of student and tutor learning satisfaction.

Establishing an Effective Learning Environment

Again, because the writing center is a relatively new learning institution and because most students are unfamiliar with writing center purpose and etiquette, it isn't surprising that their first encounter with the writing center is awkward. The first charge of tutoring personnel is to establish an effective learning environment with the student. This begins with an orientation of the student to the writing center.

Much of what I have to say about that orientation is obvious to experienced tutoring personnel, and much of it is simply human courtesy. Nevertheless, I've observed too many poorly executed orientations to ignore this significant aspect of the tutoring session. For those to whom a gracious orientation comes naturally, reiteration confirms their behavior, and for those to whom it isn't second nature, it serves as a guide to new responses.

An orientation begins with a warm greeting and an invitation to a tutoring station. Or if all tutors are engaged, a receptionist should invite students to be seated and inform them of the approximate waiting time. But when a tutor is free and has greeted the student and seated him or her at a tutoring station, introductions are next and should be spontaneous with body and facial expressions of good will and genuine interest. Part of introductions usually includes exchange of biographical information.

The aim is to set the student at ease in the new environment and establish a feeling of trust between tutor and student. A proper learning environment begins with the student feeling free of apprehension and a feeling that the tutor is knowledgeable and willing to teach. And although it is a feeling that usually builds with the actual tutoring session, the foundation of that special bond that is the particular attri-

bute of collaborative learning has its roots in this orientation period.

Let me at this point pose a rhetorical question. How do tutors know whether or not they have established the appropriate learning climate? A skilled tutor simply senses it. But there are visual signs. The student's posture, facial expression, and voice quality are all clues. The student's posture is relaxed; the apprehension is gone from the face; the voice quality reflects acceptance of the center as a learning environment and the tutor as a confidant and accomplice in the completion of a task. Sometimes the student verbally expresses a readiness to commence the session. But I trust those visual signs more. Sometimes the student who expresses a desire to get on with the task is expressing a nervousness with the environment and with the tutor himself. The tutor needs to make every effort to establish that bond of acceptance so that the verbal request to get on with the session does not precede the mental and emotional readiness. In fact, the skilled tutor who observes a state of readiness will most often be the one to suggest that they begin the tutorial. But whether it is the tutor or the student that makes the suggestion, it should only confirm that orientation is completed.

But let me return to the idea of the four student types who come to the writing center. The normal learner adjusts most readily to the writing center environment. For this type the orientation I've described above usually moves naturally and quickly to completion. But each of the last three types presents a special difficulty to the tutor.

Tutors usually dread most working with the hostile learner. This student usually comes to the center with a paper from one of the content areas. He usually does little writing and dislikes doing so. This hostility has usually been fanned into full flame by some content teacher--math, industrial arts, clothing and textile, physical education, recreation, or chemistry, for instance, who has required the student to write a paper for his course. Even though the student should logically direct his anger at his teacher or at himself for lack of preparation, he is like a card player on the last round who has drawn the old maid: he's ready to unload it on anyone. Tutors are likely candidates. They're not nearly

so threatening as a very full professor. And besides, tutors are clearly enemies; it's obvious that they enjoy writing because they earn money teaching it.

When dealing with hostile learners, the tutor should recognize two things. First, as implied above, even though these students may be directing their anger at the tutor and though it is natural to respond to fire with fire, that isn't the proper response. It may be satisfying to do so, but that not only confirms in students' minds that writing is an unpleasant activity, but that the writing center is filled with unpleasant people. They'll tell friends and teachers, and the writing center will not only become the scapegoat for bad grades they receive on papers, but ever after be branded as a place to be shunned by those whom those students have influenced.

Second, the tutor needs to recognize that though it may appear that these students are overmotivated, the reverse is actually true. They are discouraged learners. They haven't been successful as writers and are convinced that they never can be. They perceive writing as one of the evil world influences contrived to thwart their success in worldly pursuits and lower their personal self esteem. These students actually need encouragement. They need to be praised for their small accomplishments and assured that writing skills can be learned, that even they can learn them.

But before the praise, tutors must begin by defusing the bomb. They must both learn that though students' hostility is directed at them, they aren't really the cause and that exploring and predicting causes is fruitless. It serves no long range writing center purpose for the tutor to side with the student and agree that the student's teacher is surely either an idiot or a visiting professor from the neighboring college. There is little to be gained either by exploring the student's small intellectual range or inadequate writing preparation. Simply an acknowledgment that not all teachers in that content area make a practice of assigning writing is the best policy. The tutor should remain neutral. To applaud the teacher for the assignment only makes the student perceive the tutor as part of the opposition.

If tutors can learn to acknowledge the anger and not be personally offended, they

are well on the way to understanding how to deal with the hostile learner. After the student has been seated and introductions have been completed, the tutor might say, "You seem to be upset. Is school getting to you?" Then let the student talk it out. The tutor only listens and from time to time acknowledges that he understands. When the student has talked it through, and the tutor recognizes that hostility has been reduced, recognizes that a climate of confidence has been established, he assures the student that she can have writing success, and they proceed to the next stage in the tutorial--setting the agenda.

However, in assuring the student that she can have writing success, the tutor should be modest. To oversimplify the task, when the student knows that it isn't easy at all, or to succeed in making the student actually believe that it is easier than she had perceived it to be, will more likely lead to further dislike for writing when the student's grade on the paper confirms that it was as she suspected in the first place. Writing is a difficult task, she isn't very good at it, and she got a snow job at the writing center. Honesty tempered with diplomacy is nearly always the best policy.

A special type of hostile learner that the tutor frequently sees is the student who has been required to come to the writing center. Since discharging anger can consume a large proportion of the tutor's time, I'm not enthusiastic about teacher referrals. A drop-in center where students come of their own volition will be more time-efficient because it must deal less with student hostility. But whether students come incensed with a writing assignment from a content area or come because a teacher required it, the approach is the same.

Dealing with the apathetic learner is similar to dealing with one who is hostile in that both are suffering from undermotivation. While the tutor does not have to deal with anger when tutoring the apathetic learner, the apathetic learner presents other challenges. Sometimes the apathetic learner is a hostile learner who has been required to come. Once the hostility has been stripped away, the tutor encounters a student disinterested in the learning task. But sometimes the tutor encounters the pure apathetic learner. The tutor wonders how apathetic learners developed the motivation to visit the center at all. They sit list-

lessly, and the purest of writing principles fall upon their unresponsive minds as water against an inverted lead bottom bucket.

Orienting apathetic learners isn't so difficult. They are usually trusting and readily accept the implied good will of the tutor. Again, the tutor needs to be sensitive to the visual signs. While apathetic learners may signal by posture and facial expressions that they are comfortable in the writing center, there is in the eyes a listlessness and a lack of interest in getting on with the writing task. The apathetic learner might be willing to sit for extended lengths of time in the orientation period simply getting acquainted--especially if the tutor is approximately the same age, attractive, and of the opposite sex.

Apathetic learners come in degrees, the one I've described above being an extreme. The apathetic learner is a particular challenge for the tutor because unless the tutor succeeds in striking a spark of interest in the student's mind about the writing process and improving the written product, a truly satisfying tutorial is impossible. The apathetic learner accounts for a large proportion of the less than fulfilling tutorials.

Simply because students show little interest in the writing process and in improving their papers is no license for the tutor to demonstrate equal disinterest. The tutor must attempt to generate students' interest. Often, apathetic learners are discouraged learners. Like hostile learners, they may respond to assurance that writing is a skill that can be mastered. Sometimes discovering what students' personal interests are and helping them to express that interest in the written mode will improve tutorials.

The tutor's enthusiastic expression for the writing process and expressed confidence that the student can experience writing success are the foundation for working with an apathetic learner. However, frequently tutors will not succeed in generating that mystical learning climate either in the orientation or in the actual tutorial, but that shouldn't dampen their enthusiasm. They should keep striking for that spark of interest. Tutors should measure their quality as tutors by the number of apathetic learners they have succeeded in motivating to enthusiasm for writing.

A final caution about working with apathetic learners. If they don't respond after an extended orientation with enthusiasm--there isn't that expression of readiness, it is necessary to proceed to the next step--setting the agenda. To delay the process misleads students about the writing center mission. They may begin to perceive it as a social setting, or at least a pleasant study hall--which it isn't.

Every experienced tutor has worked with the manipulative learner. Unlike hostile or apathetic learners, manipulators may be overly anxious to get on with the tutorial. They are overmotivated to begin the tutorial, but are usually undermotivated learners. Their aim is to get as much information as possible from the tutor, to involve him or her as much as possible in the writing of the paper, to shift the burden of writing to the tutor. They often don't want to spend time getting acquainted or even allow the tutor to read over the paper before commencing the tutorial. They want to begin with line one immediately. This overenthusiasm is a symptom of the manipulator, and while insisting on taking the time to establish that right learning climate usually only raises a manipulator's threshold of anxiety, the tutor would be warned not to commence the tutorial too promptly. This student needs to be informed of writing center learning perimeters, and that should be done before the tutorial begins. What tutor has not discovered himself at loggerheads with a manipulator ten minutes into a tutorial because the student insists that the tutor extend assistance beyond writing center perimeters?

Even though the manipulator is anxious to get on with the task, it is important that the tutor take time to establish a feeling of good will and a bond of confidence. Particularly with the manipulator that feeling of good will is important. While the tutor may not succeed totally in soothing the anxieties of the manipulator in that orientation stage, establishment of good will can avert or reduce a confrontation during the tutorial.

When an attempt has been made to establish that comfortable learning bond, it is time to set the agenda between tutor and student. Especially with the manipulator it is important that the agenda is set immediately after orientation and before tutoring begins.

Setting the Agenda

By setting the agenda I refer to a formal

stage in the tutorial in which the tutor and student agree on the focus of the tutorial. Most tutorials go wrong because this stage is bypassed or delayed until later in the tutorial. Because the agenda has not been formally set, it is possible for some students to leave incapable of verbalizing what has been taught. That may also be the case with the tutor.

Setting the agenda serves two purposes. One, it informs students in this new learning environment what the learning perimeters are. If they are manipulators, it allows them to gracefully lower their expectations. Or if they persist in manipulation, having set those boundaries early allows the tutor to tactfully remind such students that their requests exceed propriety. Most confrontations could be averted if the agenda were set immediately following orientation and preceding the tutorial.

Second, setting the agenda gives the tutorial focus and purpose. Both tutor and student begin the tutorial with mutual direction. Both have adjusted their expectations for the tutorial, and that improves the potential for a satisfying tutorial.

A final word about setting the agenda. I've seen extremes both ways. I've seen the student dictate what was to be accomplished, the tutor agree, and try to meet expectations. I've seen the tutor listen to the student's request, then totally ignore it and proceed with what he thought was more important, his own agenda. I've seen the tutor make no request at all--simply ask to look at the paper and proceed with the tutorial. I discourage any of the above methods. The best tutorials result when a student is informed of writing center perimeters, the tutor is informed of the student's expectations, and after negotiations, the two have adjusted their tutorial expectations.

Finally, there is value in two students sitting down informally and discussing a piece of writing. There is more to be gained if one of the two is highly knowledgeable about writing principles. But I believe that when this collaborative process is refined, it can be raised from informality to a high technical skill and culminate finally in its highest position among the arts. And it is when it is practiced as a cultivated art that it yields its highest and most frequent successes.

William O. Shakespeare
Brigham Young University

A READER ASKS

As the current director of the English Writing Lab at the American Samoa Community College, I am writing to ask for information concerning federal grants for which our writing lab may apply.

Presently our writing lab is very small and in need of improvements in order to successfully meet the needs of our students. A federal grant would greatly help us to expand our resource library, as well as purchase a typewriter and possibly even a computer. Additional funds would also enable us to hire tutors and produce learning packets for our students.

I would greatly appreciate any information concerning possible grants we may qualify for and whom we can contact for more information.

Jill Makagon
American Samoa Community
College
English Department
P.O. Box 2609
Mapusaga, American Samoa 96799

NATIONAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

Regional associations may apply to NWCA for \$100 grants to support regional conferences. A letter of request should be sent to the executive secretary. A reminder: each regional writing center association should elect a representative to the national board this year. The representative will serve a term of three years and is expected to attend NWCA board meetings at NCTE and CCCC.

In addition to the regional grants, NWCA offers grants to graduate students who are using writing centers as the focus of a thesis or dissertation. To be eligible for this \$200 grant, the student must have a proposal which has already been accepted by the student's committee and graduate school. For more information and an application form, write to the executive secretary:

Joyce Kinhead
Department of English
Utah State University
Logan, UT 84322-3200



Muriel Harris, editor
Department of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907