

# The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Member of the NWCA:NCTE  
Information Exchange Agreement

Vol. XI, No. 1  
(September, 1986)

Warm hellos to newsletter friends, new and old. I hope your summer included some quiet time for recharging your batteries before plunging into the new school year. As the newsletter launches into its eleventh year, we welcome Barbara Glenn who, in addition to recuperating both from her recent wedding and also from grad school prelims, has agreed to serve as Assistant Editor and handle all the incoming checks and requests.

Many thanks to all the conscientious members of our newsletter group who have responded to the "state of our finances" letter in the June issue and sent in those generous yearly donations. And more thanks to those who used some summer leisure to write articles for the newsletter, sharing with the rest of us your insights and experience in starting new high school and college writing labs, in developing interesting new services and teaching techniques, in dealing with perennial problems such as writing apprehension, writing lab evaluation, institutional politics, and so on. There's a stack of useful articles waiting to appear! We even have an upcoming article on the first writing lab in Asia (or maybe just the first one to write about setting up shop there).

We look forward to a good year and to hearing from more of you out there. The newsletter is billed as "a means for writing lab personnel to share information and experiences." So, keep those articles, reviews, announcements, and queries coming in. And keep sending names of new members and those yearly donations (in checks for \$7.50, made payable to Purdue University and sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor  
Writing Lab Newsletter  
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Purdue University  
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## STARTING A WRITING CENTER: THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

The day after our first tutor training meeting at East Central University, I passed one of my tutors in the hall.

"I've been thinking about what you said yesterday about how starting a writing center is such a tremendous challenge," the young lady said.

"Well," I began. I hadn't meant to alarm her.

"It's so complex when you think about it," she continued in an excited voice. "We don't even have a room yet, or tables, or chairs, or anything. And the tutor training . . . none of us have ever tutored before, and there will be people coming in for help from every department on campus, with every kind of writing assignment imaginable, and all the professors with their individual idiosyncracies, just waiting to see if the center is really going to help or if it's a big fiasco."

"Well," I began again.

"And there's so little time. Only eight weeks left in the semester, and the center has to open the first week of spring. There's publicity to handle, and tutor payroll, and handouts, and supplies, and setting up record keeping. All this while you're teaching four sections of freshman comp."

"That's true," I admitted, "but . . ."

"And everybody watching you. The University Writing Proficiency Committee, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the President of the University, and this being your first year at E.C.U. and not even having tenure yet. Why, when you think about it, you've really stuck your neck out. This writing center means everything. It

could make or break your entire career."

"Oh my God!" I yelled.

"Well, I just want you to know that I think it's terrific. East Central has needed something like this for a long time, and I'm excited to be a part of it." With that, she walked merrily away, leaving behind a broken man.

This conversation epitomizes the feelings I've had since I was asked to set up a writing center--a curious sense of sublime mission and stark terror. For all its exaggeration, a grain of truth may be found in each of the tutor's assertions. The task is difficult. Tutor training, no matter how well intentioned, is never as thorough as one would like. The tutor-professor relationship, not to mention the professor-center director-administration triangle, is a spider's web of complexity. There's never enough time, and though the success of a new center may not make or break a career, its high visibility assures that if Humpty Dumpty falls, all the king's horses and all the king's men will surely know before the sun sets.

So much for the terror. As for the sublime mission, it's only fair to remember that the personalized attention which a writing center can offer students is one of the best ways to improve writing, not a panacea, not a miracle worker, but important. I might add that for all her forebodings, my young tutor was interested enough to spend her own time thinking about the center, saw the obstacles as opportunities, and was excited about the work and her own participation.

Last year when I was asked to organize a writing center, I decided to set up a structure and specific procedures which would, insofar as possible, successfully handle all of the problems mentioned by my young tutor and then some. Nothing would be left to chance. There would be no surprises. All I can say now is, "Boy, was I naive!"

To find tutors, I read a dozen articles on the characteristics of successful tutors, distilled what I found into a short description, and mailed off 180 letters asking faculty members to suggest as many as three worthy candidates from present or past classes, potentially 540 names. Next I began to assemble folders on which I taped

labels to file candidates according to major--English, business, psychology, etc.--and subdivided these into classifications--sophomore, junior, senior. There were other divisions I won't take time to mention.

Out of 180 letters, I got back fourteen. I had more folders than I had letters to put in them.

Those fourteen letters gave me a grand total of eighteen names, and only two weeks remained before training was to begin. I wrote more letters to the eighteen students congratulating them on being part of a select group, "an incredibly select group" I believe I phrased it. With so few to choose from, my interviewing technique had to be impeccable. I jotted down my own ideas and plunged back into articles and books and years of Writing Lab Newsletter until I amassed a battery of strategies the CIA would envy, including role-playing exams, questionnaires, writing samples, psychological profiles, and character analyses. The tutors' own mothers wouldn't know them so well.

Eight days passed, and no one showed up. Finally, one timid girl came to my office door. My impeccable technique consisted of rushing to her, pumping her right hand, and exclaiming, "Don't say a word. You're hired!"

In the next few days I selected nine undergraduate tutors, five girls and four boys representing five different majors. They were superb, all enthusiastic, dedicated, and very coachable. They spent two hours per week in training for half a semester even though many were already carrying 16 to 20 hour course loads. They worked for minimum wages (some offered to work for nothing), and a few quit jobs that paid more to be part of the center and gain experience in teaching and composition. I had a rule that regardless of how I felt or the day was going, I would greet my tutors as if the highlight of my day was seeing them. As it turned out, that was usually the case.

Allow me to give other examples of "agony and ecstasy." I had to make a request to the Vice President of Academic Affairs, who gave me a requisition slip, which I had to have signed and stamped by the director of purchasing, before I could do something as uneventful as buying a \$17.00 wall clock. I

had no idea what the budget for the writing center might be. Someone early on advised me to spend whatever it took, but not too much. I remember one day I stood in the bookstore, hesitating a full sixty seconds, trying to decide if I dared buy five bottles of liquid paper or if I should be content with four. Finally, my stomach sizzling, I realized what I was doing to myself, and I thought of a line from Huckleberry Finn. "All right, then," I said aloud, drawing stares from customers nearby, "I'll go to hell," and I threw the fifth bottle of liquid paper into my cart.

Other problems. After a semester of deliberation, a room was finally found in which to house the center. It was being used for storage and was filled with furniture and supplies and several layers of dust, but it was large enough and centrally located on campus. I couldn't wait to inspect it closer. I turned the key, and there in the doorway, painted into the tile, a big red and white clown face grinned up at me. Farther on was a clump of red and blue balloons. There were animals and circus scenes all over the floor. It turned out that before the university bought the building, it had been an elementary school, and this had been a kiddie classroom. I explained to the Vice President that the pictures did not quite match the image I hoped to foster for the writing center. It's hard enough to fight the stigma of a center as a place where "dummies" go without having the poor student walk in and find a clown face staring at him. The Vice President laughed and agreed, but he didn't say much, and, frankly, I thought I was stuck with Bozo. Then one day, after the room had been cleaned, I walked in to find workmen laying new tile.

So despite the nebulous quality of my budget, money has been made available. The administration set aside enough money for salaries that I could have three tutors on duty at all times. They paid for a trip to CCCO so that I could attend workshops and meetings about writing centers, and when a search around campus found no not-in-use filing cabinets, they paid for a new one. I admit none of this may sound like much compared to a total university budget, but at a small school, in a period of cutbacks and with Oklahoma colleges hit hard by the decrease in oil revenues, each of these actions is a small sign of commitment. Even more important, the Vice President's door is

always open so that I have direct communication with one of the most powerful administrators on campus, and he has reaffirmed his desire to stand by the writing center until the writing across the curriculum program has time to take hold.

For that's another plus/minus feature of the center at E.C.U. Freshman composition students, including remedial, are not allowed to attend the center. The lab is the result of a campus wide policy that writing must be a part of the curriculum of every department and every class on campus, so the center is intended specifically to help non-English faculty instructors and non-composition classes. This is a fascinating approach but in many ways much more demanding. Not every professor is happy about the policy, for example, and some believe they are being asked to accept a burden because the English faculty have failed to teach students to write. On the plus side, many professors were supportive during our first semester, and 49 attended weekend workshops where an outside consultant spoke on writing across the curriculum. Regardless of professor attitudes, with no composition clientele to draw from, attracting walk-in students was a difficult task.

So what did I learn after one semester? One night, having already kicked the dog, I was railing at my Mrs. about low attendance, and budgets, and training, and professors who had promised to send five hundred students and never sent one, how I had planned and worked, and nothing ever turned out the way I thought. She stopped me in mid sentence and said, "You're starting something new. Isn't it supposed to be unpredictable and chaotic? Besides," she added in her throw-away manner, "that's half the fun."

I gave her a condescending smirk but couldn't get any words to come out. She was right. The problem was that like most writing center directors I'd met, I was an over-achiever, a dyed-in-the-wool perfectionist. We hated loose ends, surprises, ambiguities. We wanted everything "organized."

So I wrote this article to laugh a little at the "agony and ecstasy" I've gone through (maybe my wife is right, and that is half the fun), to let those planning a new center know what to expect, and to remind veteran directors to keep a little bit of this

original chaos always alive so that centers can adapt to changes that are certain to come. As for the future of the center at E.C.U., I have every confidence that the next few years will be an unpredictable pain in the neck--every enjoyable step of the way.

James Skelton  
East Central University  
Ada, Oklahoma

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I have rewritten--often several times-- every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.

Vladimir Nabokov

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### "THE BEST THING GOING!"

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"Don't you just wish you could make them do it? I suggest, I cajole, I practically plead with them to go to the Writing Skills Center, but they never seem to take my good advice!"

Good advice--it's great advice. And how many of us have felt like my colleague? The Writing Skills Center at Salem State College is a free service, open to all. It has a proven track record--if only we can get the students on the track! But last semester one of the coordinators of the center had a startling idea. She would make her developmental freshman composition students come to the center for one tutorial session a week. Or else!

"Sounds like heaven, Nancy," I said. "Do you really think it will work?"

"We'll make it work," was her reply.

And we did.

Frank Devlin engineered the center's inception as a voluntary tutorial service about a decade ago. Nancy Lusignan came on the scene as co-director a few years ago, and I fell into the happy partnership, first as a teaching assistant and then as a Developmental Writing Skills instructor. The idea of compulsory attendance fascinated us all. Basically it's something that everyone dreams of--now we were about to try

it! Reality quickly set in. Could our program accommodate forty-four students? It's no use demanding that students show up only to have no one to tutor them.

Luckily, we were just beginning the fall term, one in which Frank runs a practicum. That meant that along with one full-time tutor we had twelve undergraduate tutors and one graduate assistant. Frank devised a schedule that allowed us to handle two Developmental Writing Skills students an hour and still have staff available for walk-in students. Our Special Services Coordinator did the actual scheduling and notified students of the day and time of their tutorials. We were off and running--but would the students show up? Could we, in fact, really make them go to their sessions?

Here is where positive thinking and a small threat worked wonders. Like Frank, Nancy not only runs the Writing Skills Center, but she also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses. Because of her contact with students in the center, she knew that tutorial assistance worked. With that unshakable faith, Nancy wrote the "mandatory attendance amendment" right into her grading policy. She explained to her students that over the semester they were to attend weekly tutorial sessions in the Writing Skills Center.

Allowing for vacations, snow days, and sick days, they were expected to put in ten appearances. Each visit was worth one half grade point. While the maximum penalty for not attending any tutorial sessions was only a total of five points off their final grade, Nancy pointed out that that could make the difference between passing or failing English.

And while Nancy's students were mulling over this proposition, Frank, Nancy, and I were back at the center planning for the semester. With forty-four freshmen, thirteen tutors, and three staff members involved, good communication was vital to the project's success.

As much as we disliked that feeling that "all we ever do is go to meetings," we knew that there was no way around it. We met for an hour each Tuesday afternoon. We talked about assignments and strategies--and attendance! Nancy scheduled weekly writing conferences with her students as part of her

course and used this time to gently "nudge" anyone who was not attending regularly. Luckily, the practicum met two hours each week. These meetings were designed to prepare students tutors, but now they took on an even more pertinent meaning. Each week, class began with a program update and then particular concerns were open for discussion; we even planned many activities around issues that arose during tutorial sessions. Although Nancy's syllabus was posted on the wall, and we made the text available, there were always issues that needed to be cleared up. Tutors who had seen their students earlier in the week had a chance to tell others what pitfalls certain assignments held. Everyone discussed what worked, and what didn't! On several occasions Nancy had to modify the assignment. In a few situations we had to change tutors. Basically, the lines of communication were wide open and the program ran smoothly. And the results exceeded our expectations!

We had a basic set of assumptions when we began. We assumed that not everyone would attend the sessions--grade or no grade! But we also held the unshakable faith that if we could get students, especially Developmental students, to attend, they would benefit greatly from the experience. They might not love the idea of coming to the Writing Skills Center once a week, but if they came, we knew that their writing would improve. We were also prepared to take some criticism from our captive audience. In fact, we made up a questionnaire that asked what we considered to be some downright risky questions! The answers to those questions, and, in fact, student reaction to the whole project really surprised us.

First of all, we had hoped for regular attendance, though we were prepared for the worst. A tally at the end of the semester showed that only one student failed to come to any tutorials. Another student only made one visit, but the average student came between six and seven times during the semester. Thirty percent attended eight or more tutorial sessions. One young man came twice a week for a total of nineteen visits!

Did the students' writing improve? Yes, it did. We knew it would. But more importantly, the students themselves thought that it was beneficial for them. They felt that they were better writers by the end of the

semester. And they were. Students who didn't know a thesis from a thesaurus now knew both. Students who put pen to paper and prayed for divine guidance learned about brainstorming. They developed a sense of audience. They gained insight into the process and the product.

The last week of school Nancy passed out the questionnaire in class. We asked the students to anonymously answer four questions: How did you feel about the tutorials? What was the most helpful suggestion you received about your writing? What was your worst tutorial session? Would you recommend that next year's Developmental students be required to attend weekly tutorials?

The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Students enjoyed having someone help them with their compositions. They felt more creative and confident. And when asked what the most helpful suggestion was, no one could name just one. They mentioned every aspect of writing from prewriting to thesis statements to spelling and punctuation. In spite of all the obvious benefits, we felt that our last two questions might draw negative responses. Surprisingly, very few students had a bad tutorial. Several admitted that if it had gone poorly, it was their fault. They had come unprepared. Other times, one session was not adequate, but it was all the time that was available before the assignment was due. A very small, but very disappointed group, cited the time that the whole rough draft had to be rewritten.

And, in light of that worst tutoring session, we finished the survey by asking the students if we should repeat the program with next year's freshmen. We anticipated that the stock answer would be "Yes, if I had to suffer, they should suffer, too." And we got it, but only from two students! Others felt that it should be available, but not mandatory, and that students "should know enough to go on their own." Eighty percent of the students responding to the questionnaire gave the program an unqualified vote of approval. One student thought that once a week wasn't enough. And another commented, "I think it's the best thing going." We agree.

Marilyn F. Bonnell  
Salem State College  
Salem, MA

THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
on  
PEER TUTORING IN WRITING

"Connecting Writing with Learning"

Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1986

at Georgetown University  
Washington, D.C.

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Call for proposals: proposals are invited for 50-minute workshops on some aspect of tutoring writing. We welcome proposals from faculty members and/or tutors, and urge faculty members to include peer tutors in their workshop. Preference will be given to those proposals most directly connecting peer tutoring with the Conference theme.

To propose a workshop, forward a 250-word description of the topic to be presented and indicate how the audience will be involved. Send proposals to William Pendleton, Dept. of English, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA 23005. Deadline: Postmarked by Sept. 15, 1986.

Registration: Requests for registration packets should be sent to Leigh Ryan, English Dept., University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

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A READER COMMENTS . . . .

I appreciate the newsletter's attempts to cut costs by not sending out statements or bills. I also like the improved format and paper quality in recent issues. (Sometimes I find the type on red paper hard to read in bad light or on a moving bus as I ride to work, but that's a minor problem.) When I finish reading my copy of each issue (usually within a day or two of its arrival), I put it in a file for tutors in our Reading & Writing Center to read. Sometimes I mark particular articles or mention them in our weekly tutor memo; other times we assign parts of an issue as required reading for the weekly "tutor development" assignment.

Mary Ellen Gee  
Reading & Writing Center  
General College  
Univ. of Minnesota

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WRITING CENTERS CONFERENCE

The Ninth Annual Writing Centers Association: East Central Region Conference will be held May 8 and 9, 1987, at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio. The theme of the Conference is "PARTNERSHIPS: CHANGES, CHALLENGES, CHOICES." Sessions (proposals to be submitted by December 5, 1986) will focus on such topics as university and secondary school writing center administration, services and funding. Dr. Frank O'Hare, The Ohio State University, will present a workshop as part of the conference. For information, write or call Sherri Zander, Director, Writing Center, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio 44555 (216-742-3055).

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NEW FROM NCTE

Teaching Writing with a Word Processor, Grades 7-13 by Dawn Rodrigues and Raymond J. Rodrigues. Urbana, IL: ERIC/RCS and NCTE, 1986. 83 pages, paperbound. \$5.00; NCTE members, \$4.00. No. 52414-015.

This new booklet in the Theory and Research Into Practice Series is designed to help teachers from junior high through freshman-level college solve the practical problems of reorganizing their composition programs around computers. Included is a review of research in computer-assisted instruction which focuses on the capacity of the machine to alter the teaching environment rather than merely to supplement traditional classroom methods. Another section of the booklet focuses on the practice of teaching with word processors and includes discussions of classroom methods, with examples of lessons that can be stored on disks.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE WRITING CENTER  
DIRECTOR: MAKING THE CENTER VISIBLE  
ON AND OFF CAMPUS

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As writing center directors, we all realize the importance of public relations. Especially if your center operates on a referral basis for tutoring, its work must be known and respected. Specifically, you want people to understand that your tutors can do more than instruct writers about grammar, punctuation, and spelling: they can also help with larger concerns such as logic, style, organization, detail selection, topic choice, and research strategies.

How do you go about making your center's capabilities widely known? We have increased understanding of our work by giving writing workshops and presentations to numerous kinds of groups, both on and off campus. Because they might suggest possibilities, I will mention the kinds of groups we have addressed, the nature of the presentations, and some guidelines for preparing and presenting workshops.

Through your center's promotional brochure, and perhaps also in an article in your faculty/staff newspaper, you can make it clear that you are willing to talk to any group interested in hearing about your center's work or any writing-related topic.

Such groups include classes of all levels and in all subjects. In addition to freshman and upper-level writing classes, work to cultivate less traditional classroom opportunities. For example, professors of undergraduate seminars which introduce students to the professional concerns of a particular curriculum might ask you to talk about resume preparation or research strategies. And seminars of introduction to graduate study in various fields, from sociology to civil engineering, offer appropriate occasions for discussing the complex writing concerns of graduate students.

Outside the classroom, look for opportunities to talk to both faculty and student groups. Honorary, professional, and social societies all may have an interest in hearing about what your center offers or about writing-related topics. As you talk with colleagues from around campus, mention possible writing presentation topics; program chairs will often be delighted to learn of your availability. After you give such presentations, be sure to stay for the social hour. Personal contacts can make students feel comfortable about coming to the writing center.

Coordinators of special programs for faculty and students are also often interested in having a speaker on writing-related topics. For example, I spoke one summer to students in a special program for minority juniors and seniors who were considering attending graduate school; several of these students later came to our writing center for tutoring. Make a real effort to stay informed about such special programs: you may find opportunities for significant writing center involvement, as we did. For

example, our university also has a special summer program for some students who may need help in making the transition from high school to college. Several of our writing center staff members taught in this program. This contact was valuable to our center because of the visibility it gave staff members with these students, several of whom are now regular Writing Center users.

Other on-campus audiences may also be receptive to writing-related presentations; remember that administrators, staff members, and adjunct groups (such as extension agents) are also concerned with writing. Last year, for example, we did a three-part seminar for our university's Office of Institutional Research and a presentation for the university's finance office. We also spoke to a group of extension agents assembled on campus for a seminar.

Possibilities for similar presentations and workshops exist also in the larger community; many universities list extension among their stated purposes. Such off-campus work can foster respect for the writing center in the administrators who are responsible for center funding decisions.

If your school has a continuing education center, you might contact the program development director and tell him or her of your willingness to give such presentations. The program development director can help you by providing guidelines on content, audience, and presentation style. One possible audience is employees of the state government. If you are interested in working with state employees, consider contacting someone in your state's office of personnel and training. You will probably be given guidelines for submitting a proposal. During 1984, as result of such a proposal, one of our center staff members conducted eight two-day workshops on writing, given for state employee groups ranging from water control officers to probation officials.

Opportunities for presentations can also be found in the surrounding business community; once again, your university's continuing education center can help. To make the availability of your services known, consider contacting the public relations dean of your business school, who may already have a well established list of contacts. You can also publicize the availability of such presentations as a

footnote to talks on writing-related topics to groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and American Business Women's Association.

As a result of having spent years thinking about audience analysis, logical supporting detail, coherent organization, diction, nuances, sentence structure, the writing process, and standard grammar and punctuation guidelines, you have accumulated a valuable and useful body of knowledge. You will find that this knowledge can be readily adapted for specific applications.

Subjects for presentations will vary greatly, depending on audience and occasion. For classes and on-campus groups, one of your main purposes will probably be to discuss the writing center itself--what it can and cannot offer and how it operates. Other appropriate presentation subjects include the writing process, choosing suitable essay topics, conducting research (perhaps given in conjunction with a librarian), incorporating quotations, answering essay questions, and preparing resumes and job application letters.

Style is often an appropriate topic choice. Audiences respond best when you discuss style very specifically, giving them particular constructions and diction choices to think about. Beware of setting yourself up as a giver of iron clad rules about styles, as many writers are bound by the conventions of their particular field.

For a general discussion of style, particularly for audiences who do business or government writing, consider using Richard Lanham's videotapes, Revising Prose and Revising Business Prose (Office of Instructional Development: UCLA, 1981). For a group of technical writers, consult technical writing texts for particular guidelines. I have found Chapter 9, "Achieving a Clear Style," from Reporting Technical Information by Houp & Pearsall (5th ed., New York: Macmillan, 1984) particularly sensible and comprehensive.

In a discussion of bureaucratic writing, examples of effective and ineffective prose can be helpful in getting your point across. One excellent source of such examples is Simply Stated, the monthly newsletter of the Document Design Center (American Institutes for Research) in Washington, D.C. You might also use locally available examples.

For extended workshops, you will need exercises and simulated writing situations. If your workshop budget will not permit a book purchase, write to publishers of books containing useful materials; most will grant limited reprint permission. You might also look for locally available materials, perhaps produced by your writing center.

If you have taught your school's business writing course, you have a head start for business workshops. If not, ask people who have taught the course for source recommendations. Several available comprehensive business writing texts have well done exercises; try to find exercises which reflect the kinds of writing your participants do in their jobs. I use exercises from Business Communication: Theory and Technique by Richard Hatch (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1983).

Currently, the Virginia two-day workshop for state managerial employees covers tone, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, style, paragraph structure, process, organization, usage, and spelling. Presenters use a combination of lecture, discussion, group revision exercises, and individual written response.

Presentation style is critical in the success of workshops for adults: be supportive, never patronizing. A casual approach often works best. Many adults feel threatened by a writing workshop and need to be put at ease. Our presenters use self-checking exercises to eliminate the possibility of embarrassment. Once they overcome their initial hesitancy, most adult business writers respond enthusiastically to discussions of writing.

The rewards of such presentations are clear. You can increase the visibility of your writing center both on and off campus while helping to spread current ideas about writing. Many adult writers are eager for current news about effective writing. They realize its usefulness (unlike some traditional students!) and welcome help.

I urge you, then, if you haven't already, to expand the scope of your writing center's operation. Both your center and others will benefit.

Joyce Smoot  
Virginia Tech

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# The Tutor's Corner

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## THE TUTOR AS MOTHER CONFESSOR

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We've all had at least one such tutee: he's slumped over in our cubicle waiting for us, his eyes red-rimmed. He and his girlfriend just broke up, and we know that crunched-up essay in his fist is his rough draft about it and that we're going to hear a blow-by-blow description of it all--but wait! Do we take off our tutor hat and put on our surplice as Mother Confessor?

The occupational hazard of getting pulled into our tutees' private affairs is certainly very real; after all, there we sit in our private confessionals week after week, giving ear (and eye) to the raw and bleeding essays that come out of our tutees' private, and often tumultuous, lives. As my boss Dr. Dabney Hart, director of the Georgia State University Writing Center, said: "We English professors (and, by extension, tutors) get to know the students so much better than most of the professors in other fields, don't we?"

Since we tutors are often graduate students and thus older than the average freshman tutee, the Big Sister role becomes even more pronounced. And there is the special hazard for the female tutor who, by virtue of her sex, is often expected to dish out gooey gobs of sympathy to unstuck tutees. The Mother Confessor predicament may become even more apparent if the same student signs up with us quarter after quarter: the tutee may seem to become more of a confiding friend than remain a student who needs help with writing problems.

A student may even shop around the writing center for the ear most sympathetic to personal problems or jeremiads about unfair profs, homework overloads, rotten class schedules, etc.

So then what position do we tutors take? How should we respond to the delicate matters or violent cataclysms of the student's life that enter into his essays? Certainly when we deal with "content" we deal with the contents of the essay, but at what point do our comments about "content" become solicitations for intimate details

about, or advice or judgments about the student's life? At what point does our understanding and empathy shade into psychological counseling? And further, can we refrain from using our position of authority as tutor and the "power play" it implies to proffer solicited or unsolicited advice to the tutee?

These problems are often not articulated in the milieu of the writing center, yet they do exist; I've certainly experienced them myself and can guess that most of us have. There is no right answer to the questions posed above, yet there is a right attitude: since we work so closely on personal essays of confession with the student, who may be undergoing very real and painful crises (and we've all been there), our response to the tutee's personal problems must be grounded firmly in discretion.

I recommend that we at least offer a word of support to that student writhing in our cubicle, but that we quickly point out that the campus counseling center--which practically every campus maintains free to students--is staffed with understanding and professional counselors who can help him make some sense out of a world falling down around him. And immediate counseling may also reduce the college's rate of attrition due to personal crises. Besides, we tutors should not put ourselves in a position of giving amateur psychological counseling, which may be misleading or incorrect in the end. We are trained as tutors, not psychologists, and as much as we may empathize with a student, we simply are not in the position to act as Mother Confessor, no matter how tempting that role may be.

These are not comments on how to pass the buck or be less-than-human beings when confronting another suffering person: they are advice on how not to make well-meant yet ineffective gestures to the tutee with a real (or imagined) problem.

Part of the success of tutorials depends on the respectful distance maintained between the student and us, which distance

insures that the tutee will value our time and effort. Becoming our tutee's confidante effaces that respect and thus subverts the tutoring process. We are not there to be the student's "good buddy" but to provide at least semi-professional help with writing problems. Being kind yet firm and avoiding hand-holding will redound to our tutorial efforts; by steering troubled students to the campus counseling center, we can both affirm our role as tutor and help the student too.

Mary E. Trelka  
Tutor  
Georgia State University

CALL FOR PROPOSALS  
Eleventh Annual Convention of  
the National Association for  
Developmental Education (NADE)

March 4-7, 1987

New Orleans Sheraton

For information about proposals, which must be submitted by October 10, 1986, please contact:

Dr. Kaylene L. Gebert  
136 Allen Hall  
Louisiana State University  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
(504) 388-2869

or

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## ROLE-PLAYING EMOTIONS IN TUTOR TRAINING

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Three years ago at a mid-semester Writing Lab staff meeting, we discovered that each tutor had worked with the same student, who was failing his composition course, and that each had experienced the same frustration with him. We all had effective approaches to his writing problems, but he refused all suggestions, only to return to the Lab to blame each tutor for his failing grade. Clearly, he didn't really want help with his writing. Instead, he wanted someone else to take the responsibility for his failure, and he wanted someone on whom he could safely vent his anger over a required writing course. It became clear then that we needed to alert our student tutors to the possibility of such situations and to teach them how to deal with these before they happened.

Few students are as manipulative and angry as the student described here. However, tutees' emotions do often affect tutoring sessions. We are not, of course, psychologists. Still, students' writing problems are often connected to their feelings about their academic situations, about their teachers, about themselves; and we tutors often feel the effects. Oddly, though, we who select and train student tutors too often examine only the prospective tutor's writing ability and knowledge without exploring her ability to interact individually and personally with students.

Role-playing emotions (RPE) fills this gap, helping supervisors spot early on who will and who will not be able to interact with students and, more importantly, enabling prospective tutors to see that writing expertise is not the only skill they need for the position.

Many, perhaps most, writing labs that train student tutors use role-playing, but they use what I will call "situational" role-playing. Briefly, situational role-playing presents the student-tutor with a problem, a situation. It asks that the tutor diagnose a writing problem and lead the tutee to its solution or that the tutor recognize and deal with an infraction of writing lab policy. Thus, while the tutor's

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sympathy, patience, and understanding are important, her writing, diagnostic, and teaching skills are highlighted. RPE, while including some basic techniques and principles of situational role-playing, reverses this emphasis.

In a typical RPE session, we first explain that, although we will pay close attention to the trainees' interpersonal skills, the role-playing is more practice than testing. We then ask a volunteer to choose one of several paper slips, each having a different emotion written on it. The volunteer hands her slip, unopened, to a supervisor and settles herself at a lab table while the supervisors and other trainees open the slip and see the word "angry," for example. A supervisor then plays an angry student, perhaps drawing upon her experiences with such students. The trainee tries to calm the "student" and establish herself as a non-threatening helper. Trainees and supervisors take notes on each performance, but we delay performance discussions until all have had a turn so that suggestions given early volunteers don't unfairly benefit later ones.

Although we, the trainers, know what emotions the slips contain, having acted out each several times before, the role-playing continues to be spontaneous, first, because we don't know which slip a tutor will draw, and, second, because the tutors' responses vary significantly.

To force the prospective tutor to see the tutee as a person rather than a writing problem, an RPE "student" never approaches the "tutor" with a piece of writing, but an assignment sheet is doubly useful. First, many actual tutees, especially those whose emotional needs demand priority over specific writing problems, often enter the lab with only an assignment. Second, a written assignment gives both trainer and student-tutor a security blanket if the trainee falters embarrassingly.

While these mechanics are fairly simple, more complicated is determining useful emotions. They should approximate tutees' actual behavior but vary enough so that each trainee responds to an emotion distinctly different from those in previous performances. Using the four categories many mental health professionals maintain encompass all human emotions--glad, sad, mad, scared--simplifies the selection process and

clarifies the two most common emotions writing lab tutees feel--mad and scared. When sub-divided, these emotions become more specific, and the trainer knows what kind of anger or fear she is portraying. We have successfully used the following:

1. Anger--a more general word than any other we use, this describes a student angry with the college system, her class, her teacher, her writing ability, the demands placed upon her, and/or her grades. However, she may have trouble specifying or articulating this anger. Thus, she may take out her anger on the writing lab and the tutor(s).
2. Rebelliousness--required to use the lab, rebellious students often associate it with "remedial" writers and resent what they feel is an implied insult. Like the angry students, they may take out their feelings on the lab staff, or they may be sullen and uncommunicative. They will return for additional help only if pressured.
3. Insecurity--at all writing levels, this seems to be the most typical emotion of students coming to the lab, and this diversity makes it especially difficult to handle. Obviously, encouraging a basic writer so frightened of writing that he cannot put two words on paper without crossing them out and assuring a political science major that a few minor adjustments will make her research paper perfectly acceptable take two different forms.
4. Confusion about assignment--this approaches situational role-playing; however, we as supervisors notice not so much whether a potential tutor can explain the assignment in several different ways but whether she is patient with the confused, sometimes frightened student and will answer even the most inane questions.
5. Confidence--this particular emotion is important to role-play because occasionally tutees enter the lab confident of their abilities, needing only reassurance that they have understood the assignment. But prospective tutors have the most trouble responding to "confidence," I suspect, because they think they're being tricked. That is, when a trainer-student says, "Here's what my assignment is, and

I'm going to do this and this. Does that seem okay?" the tutor suspects that, no, it isn't okay. Discovering that the proposed development was adequate and not a trap teaches the tutor that not all students using the lab need extensive help and that she should trust her instincts.

Besides these five, other possibilities might include frustration, discouragement, and over-dependence. In all cases, RPE trainers should emphasize not the writing problem itself but rather the emotion behind the problem.

For trainers, the greatest advantage to role-playing emotions while training prospective tutors is that it helps determine who will not be good at working with people. Since we solicit tutor recommendations from English faculty, a potential tutor comes to us because a teacher esteemed her writing ability. But, as we all know, writing proficiency or even excellence does not guarantee sensitivity to people. Nor does situational role-playing sufficiently test this ability. Even if a tutor knows how to "fix" a writing problem, she may not necessarily know how to allay or even recognize the student's anxiety, frustration, or anger. A colleague and I, in fact, devised RPE precisely because we were dissatisfied with a former Lab tutor's interactions with his tutees.

But with an RPE training session, we can weed out those prospective tutors not yet able to interact sensitively with students. For example, we knew as soon as one RPE session was finished that we would hire neither the woman who made fun of an insecure "student" nor the one who greeted extreme fear and shyness with silence. If we had used only faculty recommendations and/or situational role-playing, we might have hired at least one of these since her writing skills were good.

More important, however, is RPE's effect on the tutors themselves. First, students applying for Lab positions generally come to the first training session expecting that Lab tutoring primarily involves teaching organization, grammar, essay structure--the mechanics of writing. After that first session, in which we tell them as much as we can about the Lab and the students, their greatest fear is usually encountering a paper on an unfamiliar subject. Role-playing emotions in the second session,

shifts the emphasis from writing to people. RPE lets the prospective tutors know they will sometimes encounter problems other than organization and documentation. After that session, they can make a more informed decision about working in the Lab. In fact, about 60% of those who attended the second--the RPE session--do not return for the third and final session. Although sometimes discouraged by the sheer number of drop-outs, we are also encouraged because we then know who sincerely wants to work with people as well as with writing.

Furthermore, RPE benefits tutors by presenting the worst case scenario. My colleague and I ham outrageously. Our insecure student answers only in mumbled, tearful monosyllables. Our angry student slams books and storms around the Lab. However, once the tutor is forced to deal with these extreme cases in a secure setting, she or he can often recognize and effectively respond to similar but less impressive emotional displays by actual tutees. One tutor, hired from our first batch of trainees, related at a lab meeting how confident she felt dealing with an angry tutee because he was so much less angry than what she had had to respond to in RPE training. She added that without the RPE experience she probably would have had no idea what to do.

Finally, RPE helps tutors discover that they cannot always appease a student. I discovered this benefit just recently. Our RPE session was running late, and my trainee had drawn "anger." Jim was responding quite well, being firm but understanding. However, appeasing and calming me would take time. So, in the middle of Jim's ministrations, I slammed down a book and stormed out of the Lab. Jim was surprised and a bit hurt--he knew he was handling the situation appropriately--but my actions opened a fruitful discussion of not always being able to control a situation. Although we have not yet done so, this lesson could be taught through other role-played emotions. For example, our role-playing an insecure student usually ends when the tutor convinces the tutee to begin writing in the Lab and assures the tutee of her continued help. She has appeased the student. But what if, as does sometimes actually happen, that tutee exclaims, "No! I couldn't possibly write here" and flees from the lab? How should the tutor respond the next day when the student returns with nothing written?

These last two examples should perhaps be used mainly with experienced tutors; however, RPE should certainly have a place in training tutors. If the writing center is person- rather than equipment-oriented, as ours is, RPE provides the trainer with an effective means for determining who can best deal with the students as people. For the tutors themselves, RPE is invaluable. As one of our tutors put it, "It's the scariest part of the training sessions, but it let me know what I was getting into, and I feel a lot more confident when students have those problems than I would have without the role-playing."

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### TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

My experiences as a high school language arts instructor and my experiences in working with content area teachers who utilize "writing as learning" activities continually reinforce my belief in the necessity and value of personal instructor interaction with those students who need remediation, reinforcement, and/or enrichment to improve their writing-thinking skills. My current involvement with our developing writing lab/writing across the curriculum center, our "Communication Resource Center," makes me believe that this instructor-student interaction is even more important and more beneficial within the writing lab setting. However, as valuable for both instructor and students as this approach is, it does lead to a major non-academic problem; the students become too dependent upon the instructor for responses and suggestions about their writings and ideas.

As writing lab personnel, we must realize and we must make our students realize that writing lab instruction should and must lead to student independence of us as quickly as possible. Like effective parents, writing lab personnel measure our success by our decreasing importance to our students; we are most successful when we are no longer needed. One of the most efficient ways to help students achieve this independence (and to effectively reinforce the need for awareness of audience) is to utilize the "Praise-

Question-Polish" methods of writing response and to encourage students to form "Reading Circles."

The "Praise-Question-Polish" strategy was developed by Bill Lyons, the Language Arts Co-ordinator for the Iowa City, Iowa public schools and a facilitator in the Southeast Iowa Writing Project, for use in responding orally to student writings; however, the approach can be successfully utilized in the writing lab setting and in the "Reading Circles" concept.

Underlying the use of the "P-Q-P"/ "Reading Circles" techniques is the necessity to convince students that writing lab personnel are not the only people the students know who can read and write and who can help writers improve their writing skills. The key to helping all writers improve is to read their works carefully and respond honestly. Students must believe that others who read their works and respond sincerely can indeed help improve a specific piece of writing and writing skills in general. We should encourage our students to seek others' responses and to provide responses to others when asked.

Students need to be given practice as "responders" in the "P-Q-P" strategy, and all "responders" must understand the "ground rules" for use. The "responder" must 1. know what the criteria for and nature of the writing assignment are; 2. know the "draft number" of the piece being read; 3. read the entire paper before any responses are made; 4. make all responses as positive, specific, and encouraging as possible; and 5. make the responses in the given order.

After reading the entire paper, "responders" need to answer three questions:

PRAISE: "What do you like about my paper?"

QUESTION: "What questions do you have about my paper?"

POLISH: "What suggestions do you have to improve my revision of this paper?"

Again, responses are given only after the entire paper is read and the questions are to be answered in this order. In the writing lab setting, students can be given sample essays to practice the "P-Q-P" method

and discuss their answer with the instructor, small groups may practice the "P-Q-P" method with each others' papers, and the instructor should use this method in assessing/evaluating the student's works.

In the writing lab setting, students often need more concrete "permanent" responses since they will do much of their revision on their own and/or those who do respond may not have time for extended discussion. The three "P-Q-P" questions are readily made into an effective handout sheet and may include checklist items concerning structure, mechanics, grammar, etc. Unlimited copies of the "P-Q-P" handout should be available for writing lab students. (Copies of the "P-Q-P" handout I use are available; simply contact me at Burlington Community High School, Burlington, Iowa 52601). Also, to help students gain practice in looking objectively at their own writing, students should be asked to complete a "P-Q-P" sheet about their own work before the writing lab conference.

An effective logical extension of the oral and written "P-Q-P" approach is to encourage writing lab students to form "Reading Circles" with other students who

are in their classes. These students will all have the same background in the class and the same understanding of the assignments and can greatly help each other by using the "P-Q-P" methods with each other's works. The use of the oral and written "P-Q-P" approach and the "Reading Circles" works very well in both language arts and content area classrooms, but again, "P-Q-P" has proven most beneficial in the writing lab setting.

The writing lab personnel I have met are among the most caring and conscientious of all educators. I have come to experience and appreciate the bittersweet irony of being involved in the writing lab setting; our successes are measured by our losses. As painful as our experiences often are, we must develop students' independence of us as efficiently and quickly as possible, and helping students to utilize the oral and written "P-Q-P" methods of response and forming "Reading Circles" is one of the best ways to achieve this independence.

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