

# The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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(April, 1987)

What goes on your list of identifying features of writing lab directors? Do we talk a bit too loudly (because we're always trying to be heard over all the conversations in the lab)? Do we look slightly harried (because of constant interruptions)? Do we tend to keep on the move (because there's always so much to do)? Are these characteristics, or are they merely symptoms of the communal nature of writing labs? As articles in this month's newsletter remind us, the social--and socializing nature of the writing lab is part of its essence.

And that socializing extends to helping each other. One lab director describes for us three reference books she recommends for our bookshelves, and another director would like to make contact with writing labs that offer academic credits to tutors. You may want to respond either directly to that person or via the pages of the newsletter in an article on how you compensate your tutors.

In addition, of course, keep sending your articles, announcements, reviews, queries, names of new members, and those much appreciated yearly donations of \$7.50 (in checks payable to Purdue University) to me:

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

From the minutes of a faculty meeting at Bethel College (Ind.):

"\_\_\_\_\_ requested the faculty to return van keys immediately after use, and to be sure the interior of the vans are clean and filled with gas."

Be sure to roll up the windows first.

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

## THE WRITING CENTER AND INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS: MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH ADMINISTRATION AND FACULTY

As I was collecting my thoughts for this paper, I was concentrating on the subject of "how" we should reach out to other disciplines and areas within our universities. However, I was also being badgered by gremlins asking "why reach out?" After all, if your experiences over the years have been anything like mine, perhaps a certain tinge of resentment remains. (For those of you new to writing centers, those who've affiliated during the ascendancy of the writing lab, maybe you can just listen for a moment and smile at these rantings.)

Writing labs are now "in vogue"; writing across the curriculum programs are and have been popping out of interdisciplinary curricular committees who've "studied the research" and suddenly, miraculously, concluded that there is merit to this idea of "writing and learning" or "writing to learn." Imagine! Writing and learning, hand in hand, complementing one another.

Seems to me that we--those of us in English departments, those of us beginning to establish an entity called a "writing lab"--were suggesting heresies like "writing is learning" ten years ago, perhaps not loudly enough or strongly enough. For the most part, we were looked upon rather strangely. We wanted this writing lab to help anybody in the university, not just the English comp students, with written communication.

Ten years ago, not many were listening. We weren't important then. Even our own English department colleagues were more concerned with that book on how blind Milton really was or with determining how many parts of Hemingway may have been blown off in W.W. I. Writing competency was a minimum standard for collegiate entrance requirements. And college professors who wished to concentrate their careers in rhetoric and

composition were, at best, "underachievers." As one of my peer reviewers phrased it so eloquently, "he is doing a reasonable job with students, courses, and material which are stupifyingly dull."

So forgive me if I appear, as I begin, to have a chip on my shoulder. It's not Chip. It's Michael and Agnes and John and all the others who fell to the tenure track wayside because composition specialists weren't deemed essential to collegiate education.

Well, the pendulum has swung. Today we're needed. The pendulum will swing again, though, and we must prepare for tomorrow. That's partially "why" we're going to make connections. How and with whom is a multi-faceted question.

I'd like to respond by giving some examples from my own experiences. My first suggestion, one which you might find surprising considering my previous comment, is to go gently to your colleagues in search of friends and advocates for the writing lab. You're going to find, if you don't already know this, that not every professor in every discipline will welcome you with open arms. Particularly if your institution has a writing across the curriculum program, put yourself in the shoes of the math or accounting professor who suddenly finds that he must include writing in his course. He just might not like the idea. How would we initially feel if we were obligated to include aspects of math in our writing courses, even for the most solid of reasons?

Go gently to the faculty or to department chairs first. Make initial connections by asking to be invited to a department meeting. At that meeting explain the lab, its services. Tell the professors that you'd be willing to discuss individually any services which the lab might provide for their particular courses. What you can do will obviously be a function of your available time, staff, and budget.

There will be some legitimate requests that can't be honored. If you have more requests than staffing permits you to fulfill, keep a record. That's the type of documentation to take to the administration. For example, this year we've had requests from professors in humanities and political science to help students with research papers. In order to accommodate this

request, we adopted the mini-course concept which Muriel Harris discussed in the first issue of The Writing Center Journal (Fall-Winter, 1980).

Working with the professor, we instituted two sessions, each an hour long, to discuss the type of research paper desired, methods to conduct the research, and we taught the footnote format required by the professor. Students were not obligated to attend these sessions, but if they did, they were expected to attend both.

After these mini-courses, we encouraged the students to sign up for an individual thirty-minute tutorial to continue with the material begun. We kept records of what we did and with whom we did it. We returned a form to each professor with a list of names in attendance and a brief synopsis of the material we covered. Finally, we asked both professor and students to evaluate the job we had performed and its usefulness. If we did well, we had made a "connection" within the institution. Hopefully, someone from another discipline now felt that the writing center could be helpful, and perhaps even necessary, to his program needs.

Returning to an earlier idea, we went "gently." We did not try to convince the psychology instructor that the MLA style sheet was preferable to the APA.

This first idea of approaching individual faculty is the most important in my estimation. There are numerous other possibilities. At smaller institutions you might be able to "attach" a complementary writing component to selected coursework, one approach to a start in writing across the curriculum. Again sufficient budget and staff are necessities. Basically, a member of the writing lab attends a selected number of key classes in a particular course, and then conducts an additional class period helping and demonstrating to the students strategies for responding in writing.

Three other connections might be attempted with faculty. Writing labs should evaluate the possibility of providing in-service programs or seminars designed to help teach the teachers. As writing across the curriculum programs flourish, we can certainly help our colleagues see what kinds of writing might be appropriate for their courses, how to assign that writing so that

it's a significant part of the coursework, and what to look for in the student's production. Offering a mini-course, in-service program, or seminar to faculty discussing content-based, audience-oriented writing can be an important step for labs to take. Not only does such a program assist faculty, but it, too, is a significant service stressing the writing lab's case for administrative support.

Another service the lab might provide--and also a significant one to gain friends across the disciplines--is to help faculty with scholarly papers. It's not difficult to sit down for a half-hour or hour to read, review and critique the form of an article. Many times its author needs the feedback on the form, language, or expression. Helping that professor might produce a strong advocate for the lab.

Making connections with the faculty is an important step for a writing lab's growth and success. Making connections with students is equally important. Whatever growth takes place in our labs, we should not forget the fundamental reason for our existence; to help freshmen develop their writing skills. Perhaps we should tell them about the lab before they're freshmen--and tell their parents! Can you incorporate material about the writing center and its services into recruiting brochures? Maybe all it takes is a connection with the recruiting and admissions staff. At Penn State-Behrend, among the large doses of information perpetuated upon parents and prospects is information about the services we offer in our lab. We bill ourselves as a safety net for the freshman. We tell him and we tell his parents about the lab before the student even applies. During a summer program with parents and children, we talk of degrees, scholarships, housing, and the writing center. At freshman orientation, each student attends a brief session to remind him once again of our services. Our recruiting and orientation message is that we offer a free tutorial service. Now we're also instituting programs with our minority retention people on campus. We have undertaken a series of mini-courses, really they're forums, in which a very small group of minority or E.S.L. students sits and talks with a lab tutor. The basic issue is "how do I express myself? How do I change or alter my language so that the professor understands me? I know the concepts; I need

to learn how to state them for my audience."

I have no statistics today to tell you how many students we've saved, if any. But I do have positive feedback and response from the recruiting and minority retention staffs. Now I receive more frequent phone calls from these offices requesting tutorial services or information about the lab--another positive connection accomplished.

The final segment of this paper centers upon the administration and budget offices. Obviously the key here is to get the administration on your side. If you do, budgetary support will normally follow--or clues on grants and outside funding will follow.

Go to the administration with evidence galore of the lab's position within the university, of the services offered across the disciplines, of the connections made. It's very important to keep records and to have a healthy quart of public relations blood in your system. I never send out a significant memo about the lab, a service offered, a new accomplishment without sending a copy to the administrator ultimately responsible for my directorship and our budget. Keep a file marked "Evidence."

I send a report monthly detailing the number of students served, number of sessions, types of mini-courses. The administrator told me it was no longer necessary to do that. I never stopped. If the lab or its personnel enjoy a unique success, that information is forwarded to the public relations office. Students, faculty, the tutors themselves evaluate the lab and its services. The negative comments don't get thrown out. Problems we try to correct. Complaints which lament that we don't offer more services are dispatched quickly to the administration.

There are three primary issues which I've tried to communicate to our administrators:

- 1) I show them what we've accomplished with documented support, numbers, and evaluations;
- 2) I try to demonstrate what we are yet capable of doing given additional staff, equipment, and budget;
- 3) finally and most importantly, I

stress the accomplishments of the staff, arguing for the professional recognition which they have earned and which they deserve.

I began this discussion with some rambling thoughts about "why" reach out, "why" make these connections. To me the answer is on one level very simple, yet very important. Our writing labs are no longer isolated islands in our universities. I'm convinced that the writing center is a necessary and essential ingredient. Writing is learning in any discipline. Clear writing results from clear thought. When the student learns to write, when he learns to think clearly and objectively, when he learns to communicate effectively, he is learning to be successful in college and beyond. That's why we reach out, why we attempt these connections.

I also reach out with memories--of Michael and Agnes and John. Wherever you are, I hope you're in a writing lab because your time has come.

Michael D. Chiteman  
Penn State-Behrend

JOB OPENING

Director of the Writing Center, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, CO 80903

Description: Director works individually with students who need help with academic writing; conducts workshops; supervises peer tutors; teaches adjunct courses in basic skills and peer tutoring; works with faculty members of many departments who teach writing-emphasis courses; participates in all-college evaluation of the writing of new students.

Qualifications: M.A. or Ph.D. in standard academic discipline, with training and experience in teaching writing, knowledge of word-processing essential. Twelve-month administrative position; salary competitive and adjusted to qualifications and experience. Send application and vita by April 10, 1987 to Barry W. Sarchett, Director of Writing Program, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80903 (303-473-2233, ext. 656). Late applications may be considered.

Colorado College is an equal opportunity employer. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

SUMMER INSTITUTE

St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN (65 miles north of the Twin Cities) is offering a special four week module of three graduate/undergraduate classes from June 8-July 2, 1987. This module includes **Individualized Instruction in Secondary Schools** (English 458-558), an introduction to one-to-one teaching and small group work in the classroom and writing center. Guest speakers with secondary background include Ellen Brinkley, the 1985 winner of NCTE's Center of Excellence Award for her development of a high school writing center.

This course may be taken alone, with any normal summer school offering, or in combination with the following module courses: The Mississippi River Creative Writing Workshop (English 438-538), offered by William Meissner, features as speakers professional poets and fiction writers from the Upper Midwest; American Indian and Chicano Literature (English 495-595), taught by Steve Crow, a featured poet in the new Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry, will include presentations by the well-known southwestern Indian poet and fiction writer Simon Ortiz. Module courses, each for three quarter credits, meet Monday through Thursday. For information about campus housing, Summer School Bulletins, or application, write to Judith Kilborn, Writing Center Director, Department of English, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN 56301.

7TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATORS

April 9 and 10, 1987

Americana Host Inn, Harrisburg, PA

For more information contact Karen Coleman, Cedar Crest College, Allentown, PA 18104.

A READER ASKS . . .

The Writing Center at Western Carolina University is trying to design a system that will give tutors academic credit for their work in the Writing Center. Hopefully, this will aid in the recruitment of tutors. WCU is interested, therefore, in corresponding with writing centers that give academic credit to tutors. Please write to Terry Nienhuis, Department of English, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC 28723.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Fourth Annual Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

November 7-8, 1987  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, Indiana

"The Writing/Tutoring Process"

This conference invites peer tutors, professional tutors, and faculty to join together in discussions, workshops, and presentations to share ideas and common concerns about tutoring writing.

We invite 250-word proposals for 75-minute whole panels and workshops or for 20-minute single presentations. Suggestions are also invited for topics for informal discussions and conversations that you would be willing to lead. While proposals on all aspects of tutoring writing will be considered, we particularly invite proposals exploring the conference theme, how the writing and tutoring processes intersect and interact. Peer tutors are particularly encouraged to send in their own proposals or to join in faculty proposals.

Proposal deadline: Postmarked by June 15. Send proposals to Phyllis Lassner. For information about the conference, contact Muriel Harris.

Conference schedule: Nov. 6, evening registration and informal reception; Nov. 7, 8 a.m.-11 p.m., meals, conference sessions, informal evening reception; Nov. 8, 8 a.m.-1 p.m., breakfast and conference sessions. Registration fee (includes four meals and snacks): \$25 per student; \$50 per faculty

member. Options for inexpensive housing for students will be available, in addition to suggestions for hotel accommodations.

For conference registration, contact Conference Division Registration, Stewart Center, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

Conference Co-Chairs:

Muriel Harris  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47907  
(317-494-3723)

(and)

Phyllis Lassner  
English Composition Board  
1025 Angell, LSA  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109  
(313-747-4531)

SHOULD COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS BE PEER TUTORS?

Recently, I have been giving much thought to whether community colleges should employ peer tutors. Sister institutions employ professional tutors, faculty members, graduate assistants, and even degreed volunteers. Generally, one's budget determines the size and qualifications of the staff. But, can freshmen or sophomores with only one or two courses in composition be helpful, effective tutors? Should community colleges rely on such people?

I believe that peer tutors in a writing lab are an important resource in a community college. They function as coaches, role models, and friendly mentors. They represent people who care, people who understand what other students experience in a writing classroom. They also serve to alleviate a lot of writing anxiety. Peer tutors are a source of encouragement to other students; they were able to "do it," so perhaps their peers can also. Obviously, they can empathize at a different level than the professional. Often the professional is viewed as an authority figure with more competence than tutees believe themselves capable of achieving.

Yet, the attitudes of other colleagues, especially those in composition, can be distressing for writing lab professionals. Even in open-door institutions, negative attitudes toward the writing lab prevail. Tutoring programs have to wage a battle for the right to exist as an integral program. Although they deserve support from the entire college community, they often find a lack of support. Stephen North ("The Idea of a Writing Center") notes that one of his colleagues stated that he would not recommend a student to the Writing Center unless she had something like 25 errors per page. There are many others who view the lab as a fix-it place for losers.

I must admit that I have colleagues at the community college level who share this opinion. Moreover, in a two-year institution, the tutors are freshmen or perhaps sophomores. So some instructors act as if the tutors must be somewhat deficient or even untrustworthy. They probably give too much help, some believe, even though peer tutors are carefully monitored and trained to avoid "being too helpful." Tutors are seen as a necessary evil, but still an evil. These students, generally paid at minimum wage, play a significant role as a receptive audience--a friendly face in a sea of uncertainty. They have sailed the same troubled waters and survived. I believe that they are a positive good.

Still they occupy a precarious place in the writing lab as academic bases for advising other freshmen on how to produce acceptable pieces of writing. Furthermore, they are not English or education majors. Many are overloaded with full academic schedules, families, and other employment. Finding the best available staff is particularly difficult because the best students have little trouble in finding more lucrative positions. Moreover, the turnover rate is very high. Many come to their tutoring positions to serve as a doctor to patients, and they feel ill-equipped to do so. It would seem that a more qualified staff and a more stable work force is a better investment of scarce resources.

It is significant though that writing tutors--peer tutors in particular--do share valuable tricks of the trade. Since writing is both a solitary and social act, peer tutors can serve as a sympathetic audience to read and to comment on written prose.

Peer tutors help in the writing process by offering encouragement and by sharing what they have learned about writing. Many peer tutors are amazed at what they are able to learn in such an exchange. To the struggling student, they are role models. To the excellent student, they also serve as models. Some of the most loyal students who come to the writing lab are the above-average writers who have found a good tutor to exchange ideas with. When I was an undergraduate, I always asked friends to read over my papers and offer suggestions. I would also go to my instructors, but I would never skip my peers in seeking good advice. For some students, peer tutors are less threatening than a visit with one's instructor. Thus, the learning environment is enhanced by peer tutors and their contributions. The talking and sharing going on can be valuable indeed. Even tutors come to the writing lab to be tutored by their peers, an exciting development. Each year as I see writing lab tutors graduate with associate degrees, I am pleased when so many graduate with excellent academic records.

The peer tutor at a community college contributes to a learning environment that promotes intellectual growth and cooperation. It is a joy to see students of diverse ethnic backgrounds working together. Peer tutors are necessary at the community college level. Their contributions allow learning to occur with greater intensity and frequency than it would otherwise. Our peer tutors have helped Vietnamese students with very limited English skills to eventually graduate from the college. My preference is for peer writing tutors who add a very much needed dimension to student growth and development. Their role is important to higher education.

James Boswell, Jr.  
Harrisburg Area Community  
College  
Harrisburg, PA

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North, Stephen, "The Idea of a Writing Center" College English 46 (September, 1984): 433-46.

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# The Tutor's Corner

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## MY INTERNSHIP: A UNIQUE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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When I agreed to be a writing intern during one semester at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, I had no idea, really, of what I was getting into. I knew only that I was going to be working with other students who were having trouble with writing. As I walked into the Writing Center that first day, I was nearly overcome by fear and panic: The room was filled with ominous microcomputers. And as I talked to the Director, I slowly realized that I not only was expected to help others with their writing (about which I was already insecure enough), but also learn to use, and teach others to use, those frightening things called Apple IIe's. Instead of bolting out the door, as I longed to do, I stayed. And because of that hesitant decision, I had one of the most unique and rewarding learning experiences I've ever had.

Working in the Writing Center in a collaborative one-on-one setting instead of a more traditional top-down lecture class provided unusual and non-traditional learning experiences. My own personal learning and growth during that semester was basically in three areas: word-processing skills, teaching experience, and friendships.

One of my biggest anxieties as I started that semester was working with the word processor. "Computers," "software," "programs," "discs," and so on were alien words that conjured up images of an Orwellian world I was simply not interested in. I loved the world of ideas and writing--not the world of technology. I was a snob of sorts, but fear was a big part of that chip I had on my shoulder. I was convinced that a computer had a mind of its own and would thwart anything I might want to do. But, out of necessity, I began learning how to use the word processor, and I began enjoying it--almost against my will. I found it fun to play with and very useful in writing. It made the nightmare of revisions almost bearable. So, despite my anxiety and my will-not-to-learn, I learned, and as with any newly acquired knowledge or skill, I reaped the immediate benefits of that

knowledge/skill as well as the more important knowledge (and satisfaction) that I could "do it."

The second area of my own personal growth was in the teaching experience I received. I had seldom acknowledged, even to myself, that I might like to teach someday. Because I am an extremely introverted and, at times, selfish person, I had often wondered whether the constant interaction with students would be too emotionally draining on me and also whether I would really care about helping others learn. I had made a commitment to our Director to be an intern, so I would have done my job anyway. But working as a writing intern quickly became more than just "a job."

Over and over during the semester, when I was busy with my own studies or simply pre-occupied with my own concerns, a student would come to me and ask for help. The rush of excitement I felt, coupled with a real desire to help the student, helped me realize that I was not too introverted or selfish to consider teaching. But, although having a strong urge to help others is a big part of being a good teacher, being able to actually help them, is something else again. Looking back over the semester, I'm not sure if I really contributed all that much to most of the students I worked with, but I do have many memories of students coming into the Writing Center all tied up in knots about writing--and memories of them leaving laughing, relaxed, and confident about their own ability to write.

I learned that because writing is such a personal, ego-involved process, teaching writing should involve two important tasks: instilling confidence and sharing knowledge/processes/techniques that actually help improve writing. Two of my "students" come to mind when I think of these two separate ways to help others learn. And although there is always a mixture of confidence building and sharing knowledge, still these two students represent to me these two very important parts to teaching.

Student "A" was an older German lady who had gone back to get her GED after raising a family. She'd been in college for awhile and was majoring in religious studies. Her husband and her three children each had a doctorate-level education and had made her feel "dumb" and inadequate because of her ninth-grade education. When she came in to the Writing Center for help on a philosophy paper, I was struck by how little help she actually needed--in her writing. She did need help with self-confidence, though. We went over the minor problems in her paper, which were mainly with spelling and syntax. But then we began to talk--about her. Later in the semester she felt comfortable enough with me to begin showing me other papers she had written, one of which was a very moving piece on the Holocaust. The lump in my throat when I finished reading it almost prevented my telling her how very good I thought it was. I encouraged her to take an expository writing class, gave her the name of the professor I considered to be the best in expository writing, and even talked to the professor about her. I "nudged" her to talk to him about his class, which she finally did. The last time I saw her she was ecstatic--because writing was what she had wanted to do all along! The deep satisfaction I felt at having been even a small part in helping a "student" have more self-confidence--enough, finally, to pursue a goal that had been only a dream before--was just one of the rewards of my internship.

Student "B" I helped in an entirely different way. She had turned in a research paper which had been marked down quite a bit for its lack of organization. In fact, it was one of the most disorganized papers I had ever seen. But, her content was good, and most importantly, she wanted to learn and to revise it. I spent two hours working with her--having her "tree" what she had wanted to say in her paper, myself "treeing" what I thought she had actually said, and comparing the two. I shared some of my own personal techniques for revising, including color-coding sentences according to paragraphs. She came back to the Writing Center a few days later with her revision. The paper was 100% better, and her teacher was so impressed with her revision process that he asked her to demonstrate it to the whole class! She was very proud of her effort and the results, and I was proud of it, too. Again, this kind of satisfaction

in helping others is just one of the many rewarding and enriching experiences of my internship. And although helping students one-to-one is not the same as having the responsibility of an entire class (and classes), still the knowledge that despite my introvertedness and selfishness, I just might be able to teach--someday--was another valuable benefit of being an intern.

And finally, the last area of personal growth and enrichment in my internship was really an added bonus: the pure joy of getting to know other students who were interested in ideas and writing, and working with our Director, Sally Crisp. When I started my internship, I knew very few people at UALR who were English majors like myself, mainly because I had taken only one upper-level English class prior to this semester. Because UALR is a commuter campus and because many of its students are older returning students, I had felt a void that many students feel, the absence of a sense of belonging, a sense of a community within the context of UALR. The Writing Center filled this void. Not only did I enjoy the give and take, the easy camaraderie that existed between the interns--both in and out of the Writing Center, but I also loved being able to talk to others who loved what I loved--writing. The Writing Center became a kind of home away from home, a community of people who had much in common. Off-duty interns frequently dropped by to visit, and many times interns from previous semesters would come in to say hello.

And although there was always this casual, relaxed atmosphere in the Center, it never became disruptive to the students who were there working because our director had the sensitivity and intelligence to be able to foster this atmosphere without losing sight of the main function of the Writing Center. Working with our director was a very enjoyable and profitable learning experience in itself. She helped me to better understand and appreciate the writing process by working with me as I worked with other students. As my teacher, she was an invaluable aid to me in my own writing classes by reading my writing and giving me critical feedback and by encouraging and supporting me in my own studies.

In the final analysis, the learning and growth I experienced during that semester's internship was unique in my college career.



Its non-traditional, collaborative learning environment provided quality, not merely quantity education. I feel fortunate indeed to have had the opportunity to be a writing intern at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. It was a truly memorable learning experience.

Susan FitzRandolph  
Writing Intern  
University of Arkansas  
at Little Rock

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### WRITING CENTER PEDAGOGY: DEVELOPING AUTHORITY IN STUDENT WRITERS

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Most writing teachers worth their salt recognize that writing centers are a useful part of writing programs but are not necessarily an integral part of those programs. All too often, writing centers are understaffed, inadequately funded, inconveniently located, and certainly underestimated. Teachers direct students to the writing center to clean up their comma splices and subject-verb agreement errors when their real difficulties lie in audience awareness; students themselves, if they come under their own steam, want to drop off their papers for a quick grammar check-up, only to be shocked by our insistence on reviewing the assignment and their overall approach to the paper. This is a situation all too familiar to the staffs of many writing centers.

There may be a way out of this frustrating situation, however; not one way actually, but several ways, all interconnected, and more importantly, fueled by a fundamental understanding of what writing centers really accomplish with students. Essentially, we must develop a rationale, a theory, for what we do and how we do it. This project is already underway in many quarters.

We have all seen the articles and heard the papers attempting to abandon the general conception of writing centers as grammar first aid stations. These articles mark the shift of the center's mission from narrowly working to improve students' writing skills to working with students to develop a sense of themselves as writers. Stephen North,

for example, asserts that "At the end of a tutorial session, it is the writer who should be changed . . . . It's the writer we work on; the text is essentially a medium" ("Teaching Tutors to Talk About Writing" 439).

One of the many factors underlying this shift is the emergence of epistemic rhetoric, a theory which challenges not just dominant writing theories, but also current conceptions of how humans know. As Ken Bruffee has noted in College English, the collaborative learning which goes on between tutors and their clients derives from an epistemology at odds with the theory which currently structures how learning occurs in our schools. In this current theory, teachers, who have certified knowledge, transmit it to students, who soak it up like so many sponges. The hallmark of this approach is the lecture, which the teacher delivers from behind a lectern in front of the room to rows of silent students. The teacher controls the classroom discourse, reserving to him or herself the right to speak, and granting it to students only to check on the accuracy of their absorption. Implied in this theory is a view of knowledge as an inert package of facts which represent an immutable reality. Neither the teacher nor the students seriously questions these facts, for to do so constitutes a challenge to reality itself, not to our knowledge of that reality. And we all know that a person who challenges reality is regarded in our society as "crazy."

We are all too familiar with the traditional classroom practices which this epistemology fosters; they are practices which invest authority exclusively in the teacher, and thereby promote an unhealthy dependence and passivity in students. The writing textbooks we use offer an excellent example. We are familiar, of course, with the metaphor of writing as a physical skill like swimming, cooking, or skiing. But textbooks frequently use a more telling metaphor: writing as therapy. Authors often recommend writing to students as a way for them to "work through fear," "cope with anxiety," or "conquer confusion." Implied in these descriptions is a notion of the teacher as therapist, dispensing writing as a medical treatment to students who suffer from emotional and intellectual diseases.

This metaphor carries over into how we regard our students' writing. We ask them

to be creative and responsible writers--but to do so within the limits of this writing assignment, by that due date, on this topic, typed double-spaced for easier marking. Then, when students "submit" their papers to us, we treat them as exercises, not as communication. How many of us take papers home to grade rather than read? We read not so much for what our student write as for how they write. Of course, that's our job, and when we have batches of 80, 90, even 100 papers to look at in a weekend, who has the time to read? Nevertheless, the result is that in traditional classrooms, students don't own their writing; teachers do.

These practices and the set of assumptions they derive from are also largely responsible for the misconceptions about the role of the writing center which staff must fight. Because teachers and students alike come to writing centers from traditional classroom relations, it is no surprise that a large part of our job is re-education. A recurring comment in the literature (and among our staff) describes the student mentioned earlier who wants to drop off a paper to be proofread or check for grammar. Another frequent remark concerns the misconceptions of teachers who send their students to tutors in order to "clean up" errors. To continue the medical metaphor, teachers and students alike see writing centers as first aid stations (in fact, they're often called "clinics") and tutors as paramedics called in on emergencies to resuscitate failing papers. The pressure is on the tutor to "fix" the paper quickly, while the focus is on the end product and its surface features.

Only as this traditional model of learning has been challenged by a new epistemology has the importance of the writing center's role in learning begun to be seriously explored. Unlike the old theory, this epistemic view portrays learning as an active process of joining a given discipline's discussion of how it interacts with the world. Within this framework, students and teachers represent different discourse communities. Although teachers are still certified representatives of a discipline which students intend (or need) to join, students are credited with knowledge of their own, derived from other discourse communities, which they bring to the classroom. Learning, therefore, becomes a process of social assimilation and challenge, while knowledge is an ever-changing, socially constituted process of discussing

the world. In this learning process, questioning that knowledge is a vital part of learning because it clarifies the social nature of the assumptions underlying the discourse, and it generates new knowledge.

This concept of joining a discourse community is central to understanding the ramifications of this new epistemology for how learning goes on in writing centers, for joining a discourse community is more than acquiring the appropriate knowledge or skills. It is learning how to think, act, and speak in ways which that discipline accepts as normal. In other words, it is not only what people know or how they speak and write that mark them as members of a given discourse community; it is also how they interpret and react to the world. Essentially, then, a discourse community is grounded not just in common knowledge and patterns of acceptable language use, but also in rules of behavior and in social relations which distribute authority and knowledge among members and which determine who is a member and how to become one. The tutoring that occurs in writing centers, then, becomes a social practice as well as an educational one, where students learn not just correct or even effective ways of writing, but also new ways of experiencing and behaving in the world.

These practices are built into the very structure of writing center operation, just as classroom practices are governed by their own structures. Even the first moments of the tutorial signal an initial departure from students' traditional dependence and passivity. Students initiate learning, especially if they are self-referred, while the tutor's task is to collaborate and extend that learning. Even when faculty refer students, it is still students who exert initial control by making and keeping appointments at their convenience. Most importantly, students set the initial agenda for learning by describing why they want assistance and by bringing the materials for the session. This start is exactly the opposite of traditional educational practices where the teacher determines the agenda for learning. Thus, the tutorial conference sets the stage for students to behave in ways previously unavailable to them in the classroom.

The structure of discourse in the conference also helps students to throw off their dependence. In a traditional class-

room of thirty students and one teacher, the teacher talks and the students listen; in a tutorial conference, two students--or one tutor and one student--talk to each other. Getting their clients to talk helps tutors to establish the student at the center of the conference. This student orientation allows tutors to adopt a more holistic approach to learning to write by modeling how writers talk about their writing, with important consequences for learning. As Thom Hawkins notes, "it is the dialogue that teaches students how to argue, to analyze, to restate" ("Intimacy and Audience" 31). At this individual level, dialogue not only actively involves the student in learning, it restores the communicative dimension to writing. Because tutors are not the students' teachers, they can focus on the students' meaning in their papers.

In the classroom, an assigned paper is a means to an end. For example, a paper on family traditions for an anthropology course may be intended to help students understand that seemingly private family practices actually reflect larger cultural systems. The teacher, therefore, regards the students' expressed ideas as important primarily for the evidence they offer that the student understands an anthropological concept. In a tutorial, on the other hand, the tutor has no such agenda, but instead concentrates on the students' meaning for its own sake. Without any specialized knowledge of the course, the tutor is free to react as a "dumb reader," who can sincerely ask what a specific term means or express confusion without implying a judgment on the student's competence in the course. The student, in response, can use those reactions to clarify the meaning, not merely to demonstrate competence. The distinction here is subtle but important, for in demonstrating competence, students concern themselves with the teacher's evaluation; in clarifying meaning, students concern themselves with an audience's understanding. In other words, students behave like authors.

These are just a couple of the practices which promote student authority. We can all point to several more in use in the writing centers where we work. This description also sets up a contrast between writing center and classroom which isn't always as sharp as it is characterized here. Writing centers are not always egalitarian, just as writing classrooms are not exclusively

authoritarian. But in general, the practices which most writing centers rely on place students, not subject matter, at the center of learning to write. Until recently, such a student orientation was scoffed at as a non-intellectual, "touchy-feely" experience which accomplished little beyond emotional well-being. However, the emerging understanding among writing teachers that learning and knowing are social acts regulated by community norms is encouraging them to re-evaluate practices so familiar as to be invisible. Writing centers provide an important arena for this re-evaluation. Writing centers are building in their clients more than a positive self-image; in helping our students learn to make their own meanings, we are producing better writers. But more importantly, we are re-defining what it means to learn and to teach in a socially constituted learning process. Perhaps once we understand that, we can argue with greater authority for more support from our institutions and our profession.

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## THREE USEFUL WRITING LAB REFERENCES

Hacker, Diana. Rules for Writers: A Brief Handbook. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. 437 pages. Index.

Herman, William. Portable English Handbook. 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986. 444 pages. Index.

Rizzo, Betty. Priorities: A Handbook for Basic Writing. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. 426 pages. Index.

Hacker, Herman, and Rizzo all claim to have written comprehensive, user-friendly handbooks, and with some reservations their claims are justified. In fact, their handbooks richly deserve space on reference shelves of writing labs.

Physically the books are very similar: all paperbacks, reasonably compact, and approximately the same length. Readability levels are eighth grade for Rizzo and tenth for the other two. All three cover the expected basic content with some welcome commissions and at times puzzling omissions. Moreover, all three offer examples of good and poor usage with simple, detailed explanations, and, additionally, in Hacker's case, clear graphics with brown handwritten corrections of black typescript. Finally, all include exercise answers in the text, in Hacker's and Herman's cases partial answers and in Rizzo's all answers, welcome evidence of a new stress on text self-help features.

As one might expect, contents of the books vary somewhat, each having special strengths and weaknesses. Hacker covers non-standard English (-s, -'s, and -ed endings, irregular and omitted verbs, use of a/an and double negatives). Her primary emphasis is upon revision and editing skills. The research paper chapter is outstanding in the following respects: a professional search technique, advice on note cards and plagiarism, a full-length model paper with explanatory notes, plus a usable correction symbols chart (with page numbers) on the inside back cover. However, she fails to explain the use of a dictionary for the novice writer (for example, the uses of hyphens, compound words, labels and dots to divide words into syllables) or to give meaningful help with introductions and conclusions of papers.

Herman is the only one of the three to include study skills (and diagramming). His spelling section offers a detailed treatment of problem words (including a list with trouble spots printed in bold black print) and words frequently confused by students. The research paper chapter is unrivaled in its coverage of the use of subject labels on note cards and their usefulness in organizing papers, introductions to quoted and paraphrased materials, and a sample paper with explanatory material including a discussion of the uses of note cards in writing a research paper. In a curious omission, however, he does not treat sexist language but offers an admirable classified list of research paper resources including women's studies and ethnic materials.

Rizzo is superb in her treatment of the essay as an expanded paragraph, introductions and conclusions and titles (a much-neglected area in most handbooks). Also, in her spelling section she explains the uses of hyphens and dots between syllables in dictionaries. The weakest part of her text is the research paper chapter. The student in need of basic help on a research paper will fare better in using the Hacker and Herman texts rather than hers. The resource list is skimpy, topics for note cards receive short shrift, and only a single style of model paper is covered (with endnotes but without a cover page). The sample paper is not in typescript and lacks explanatory material. Furthermore, the handbook lacks a glossary of usage. However, the text is comprehensive and offers copious exercises with answers for all of them at the end of the text.

The greatest difference among the three handbooks is in their organization. Hacker sticks to a traditional handbook arrangement, accessed by a detailed, cross-referenced index. Herman divides his book into three parts: grammar, usage and effective writing, and the research paper. He also includes a traditional index. However, in a radical departure for handbooks, he uses a dictionary-type alphabetical approach to Part II: An Index to Usage and the Principles of Effective Writing, an eminently sensible choice. In fact, one wonders how soon a complete dictionary-type, perhaps thumb-indexed, handbook will appear. Rizzo's handbook is

organized by three personal "priorities." Unfortunately, such an arrangement has the effect of sending users on a scavenger hunt in a search for scattered bits of information. For example, numbers are treated in six different places. Moreover, her correction symbols chart (inside back cover) loses its effectiveness when students are referred to several pages for help or to none at all as in the case of idioms and logic.

Finally, however, differences of opinion make for horse races and handbooks. Upon any given occasion one particular horse or handbook will enter the winner's circle. That is why writing labs and writers need a variety of handbooks, including these three.

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#### BEYOND TUTORING: THE WRITING LAB AS THE WRITE PLACE

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"The Writing Lab has  
revolutionized our school!"

I would not have dared describe Hazelwood West High School's Writing Lab in such strong language even in my moments of greatest pride. But an eleventh-grade student volunteered that exclamation to a St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter who came to school to interview the Lab staff. We believe that his comment represents the attitude of many of our students. We did not gain that reputation just by tutoring, although we still consider that our main purpose. Rather, we have tried to make the Writing Lab a real center for writing activities in the school.

For example, administrators, department chairs, and counselors now routinely send to the Writing Lab any information they receive concerning writing contests. We publicize the contests via the school bulletin and memos to teachers in appropriate departments, write up "capsules" of information about each one for students' quick reference, and keep all the contest information on file. Students may come to the Lab for help in getting started on their contest papers, for editing assistance, for word

processing as they compose and revise, and for printing final copies on our letter-quality printer. The Lab staff takes the responsibility for mailing all contest entries on time.

As a result of our involvement, student entries in writing contests have risen from almost zero to approximately one hundred entries per year. And we have some winners! One deaf student, writing about the opportunities for employment for handicapped people, won second place in two contests in our first year of operation. Several students have been published in Missouri Youth Writes, the yearly anthology of selected student writing published by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English. One student's fantasy story was selected in 1986 as the best entry in the twelfth-grade division of the national McDougal Littell publication of student writing.

We also try to provide students with other opportunities for writing and for testing their ability against others of their age. The University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri, holds a Writing Festival each spring for state high school students. One or two members of our three-member staff always give up a Saturday to take five students to the University, where they hear an outstanding writer speak, write impromptu essays, and participate in critique sessions with a University composition instructor.

Sponsoring a Writing Club is an additional activity. Hazelwood West sets aside one class period biweekly for students to attend school-sponsored clubs of their choice. In 1985 the student council approved the concept of a Writing Club, with the Lab staff as sponsors. In its first year, the Writing Club sponsored an all-school writing contest, awarding ribbons to winners, and produced a literary magazine with approximately one hundred entries from students, faculty, and alumni. Plans for this year include those two activities plus the sharing of members' writing at meetings and attempting to get area writers to be guest speakers.

Like most high school writing labs, the existence of ours came about mainly because of computers. We have twenty-five computers and twelve printers, which are in use much of the time almost every day. They are for the use of the English department, although we allow anyone to use them as long as stu-

dents preparing writing assignments get first choice. We do not find that computers improve the quality of writing, but we do find them to be a great motivator. Even the slowest, most reluctant students produce writing when they can use the word processing program. A number of students come to the Writing Lab just to do word processing; they don't want or need tutoring.

Our professional library is another feature that may be unique to our Writing Lab. To encourage English teachers in our school to keep up with research on writing, we have bought, during our three years of existence, about seventy-five books on theory, research, and methodology related to writing. For example, we have multiple copies of Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, books by Donald Graves and Donald Murray, Kenneth Koch's books on teaching poetry, and many others. We also subscribe to Writing, a monthly magazine that has excellent articles for students on many different writing tasks. We order thirty copies so that teachers can have class sets if they want to teach a lesson from Writing. The Lab also has a membership in NCTE and receives English Journal and

Notes Plus. We encourage teachers to come to the Writing Lab to browse and to check out books or periodicals for their own reading or class sets of Writing for use in their classrooms.

The Hazelwood School District has three high schools, with a writing lab in each one. Since we were one of the first public school districts in Missouri to establish writing labs, ours have served as models for many schools that are now inaugurating them. The Writing Lab at Hazelwood West High School was cited by NCTE as a Center of Excellence for 1985-87. As a result of the publicity generated by that designation, our Lab has had many visitors and telephone calls, as well as written requests for information. Staff members have also made presentations at several local, state, and regional conferences, explaining how our Writing Lab works. We welcome all inquiries about our Lab, which we call "The Write Place," a name we feel accurately represents our students' perception and our philosophy.

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