

The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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Hearty, loud, and enthusiastic hellos to everyone as we gear up for another year. So many new faces in the halls to meet, to work with, and to learn from. If only they didn't look younger than ever!

This summer has been a pleasant one of reading a particularly interesting batch of manuscripts for articles that will be appearing in the newsletter this year. On tap for future issues are articles discussing the politics of peer tutoring; the strategies of the writing conference; methods for starting a high school writing lab; tutor training; strategies for working with students learning English as a second language and working with dyslexic writers; a discussion of what tutors learn from tutoring; a look at answering a grammar hotline, and more. There will also be some thoughtful and some light-hearted comments on tutoring by peer tutors writing for the "Tutor's Corner" column.

So, stay tuned--and stay on the mailing list, a feat easily accomplished by remembering to send in your yearly contribution of \$7.50 (in checks made payable to Purdue University), along with your announcements (deadlines: the first of the month for the next month's issue), articles, reviews, questions, comments, and names of new members to me:

Muriel Harris, editor
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P.S. A challenge to tutors: We have a request to run a "Most Comment of the Month" contest. The first entry is for the category of "Most Inaccurate Comment of the Month":

"I just have a quick question about this paper."

What's your category and entry?

MAKING THE MEDIUM THE MESSAGE IN FACULTY PRESENTATIONS, OR, HOW TO GET THE FACULTY TO VALUE PEER TUTORING

To publicize the University of Vermont Writing Center, I have often spoken before groups of faculty members at department meetings and at across-the-curriculum writing workshops run by Toby Fulwiler, the Director of Writing.

Initially, I used my time to present loads of information about every aspect of the Center: ways in which tutors are recruited and trained, services we provide, statistics on how the Writing Center has grown, methods faculty members can use to encourage students to come, and so on.

I always left feeling my talk had been well-received--faculty members readily lamented that the quality of student writing is deplorable and expressed surprise that a continual stream of students didn't file in for our help. But this verbal support never got translated into action; faculty members did little to ensure that the poor writers in their classes came to the Writing Center for help. So I developed a presentation which would, I hoped, evoke a stronger response.

After introducing myself, I divide the faculty members into groups of three (a writer, a reader, and an observer) and have them role play a tutoring session over a student paper or over their own papers written during the workshop. My instructions are intended to make them aware that they themselves engage in such sessions whenever they ask a colleague to read one of their papers:

Situation: The writer has just written a draft of a paper and feels a need to have an objective response before revising. She wants to know if her ideas are clearly conveyed, if any parts are difficult to follow, if any parts sound awkward. So she is asking a colleague whose

writing she admires (the reader) to take a look at the paper.

I then pass out to the observers the following list of questions to help guide their observations:

1. How much of the time was the reader doing the talking? the writer?
2. What form did the reader's part of the dialogue take? (questions? observations? answers to questions?)
3. What proportion of the reader's comments criticized the paper? praised the paper? were phrased negatively? positively?
4. Were any changes decided upon? If so, how was each arrived at? (Was the suggestion for revision made by the reader? the writer? the writer in response to the reader? through dialogue between reader and writer?)
5. What aspects of the paper were discussed? Was time spent clarifying main ideas? clarifying supporting ideas? adding details? improving organization? improving coherence? improving style? correcting mechanical errors?

After fifteen or twenty minutes, I stop the groups, put the questions on an overhead for the entire group to see, and ask the observers what they observed. I have found that usually the readers have done much of the talking. They have asked a few questions but have spent most of the time pointing out the paper's weaknesses. In many of the groups, the readers' comments have been critical and phrased negatively, emphasizing the problems with the papers. The suggestions for revision almost always have been made by the readers. What aspects of the paper have been discussed varies greatly, but many readers have dealt with problems in the order in which they occurred (or were noticed) in the paper. The tone of this discussion is very matter-of-fact: there seems to be general agreement that all has gone as it should and that the writers have been helped by the readers.

Then I observe that I train my tutors specifically not to act as the faculty members have. I direct them to get the

writer to do much of the talking, to ask lots of questions, to praise the paper's strengths, to phrase criticisms constructively, to get the writer to decide what and how to revise, and to deal with the student's "biggest" problems first, often in the order in which they occurred in the writing process rather than in the paper.

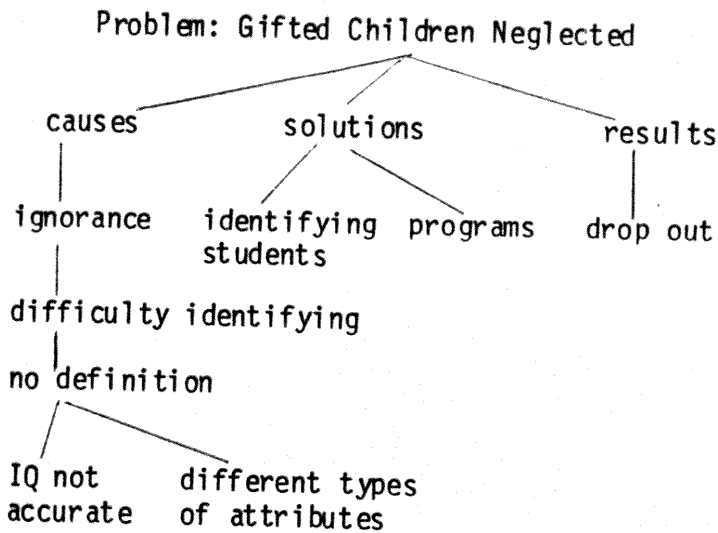
To explain why I discourage my tutors from responding as the faculty have, I introduce the concepts of teacher-centered and student-centered learning. I claim that while both methods will produce better papers, the second will better help students become better writers. The student-centered approach will help students learn more, retain it longer, and transfer it to other situations more readily.

To back up my claim, I describe how I would train my tutors to respond to a student paper on gifted children. They would begin by complimenting the writer on the paper's strengths: it fulfills the assignment, there is a clear sequence of ideas, and there are very few errors. Next, the tutors would try to get the writer to see the main problems. They might have the writer make a list of the main topics covered in each paragraph:

- gifted children neglected
- common cause--ignorance
- difficulty in identifying
- no clear definition established
- IQ not correct
- different types
- work at advanced level
- learn to read early
- attributes
- need proper programs
- results--drop out

The tutors would then discuss with the writer the relationships between these ideas, starting with "cause," since the writer herself uses this word. Which of the topics are causes? From here, the writer could be led to see that identifying gifted children is the first step to solving the problem, that programs are also part of the solution, and that the drop-out rate is a result of not solving the problem. At this point, the tutor might show the student how to construct a concept map or tree diagram which more clearly reveals the relationships

between the ideas:



The tutors could now ask the student the many questions suggested by the diagram: Which topic is most developed? Is ignorance the only cause? Is there a way to identify these students? Are the programs described? Do we see how they will solve the problem? Are there other solutions? other results? What is the purpose of the results statistic? Eventually, the student should see that more information needs to be included (perhaps more research needs to be done) and in what areas.

Now I explain why this student-centered approach will result in better writers rather than just better papers--in more learning, longer retention, and more transfer. For one, the writer has been given a general strategy rather than paper-specific criticisms and directions. She leaves with a technique which she can apply to future papers for identifying, analyzing, and solving organization and development problems. Secondly, the writer leaves the student-centered session feeling empowered rather than incompetent or dependent. The praise of the paper's strength, the focus on the large problems, and the providing of a strategy to solve the problems leave the student feeling capable of revising, un-intimidated by the difficult task of writing.

I end this part of the presentation by explaining how the peer relationship actually enhances student-centered learning. Two requirements for student-centered learning are time and an honest rapport--two things often lacking in the faculty-student relationship. Given fifteen minutes in which to conduct a conference, I myself usually resort to the teacher-centered

approach. And after several conferences on a paper, I often end up wondering who has done the revising. But tutors have the luxury of spending an hour or more with one student. They have the time required to get the student to see the problem and to teach a strategy for solving it.

While peer tutors do have time, they don't have to give grades. Given the pressures of grades and the deference often accorded faculty, students are often reluctant to volunteer that they see problems in their papers, reluctant to offer their own ideas for revision, reluctant to offer differing opinions and engage in an open and honest discussion. Student-centered learning is difficult to initiate when the student expects the teacher to do all of the talking. On the other hand, peer tutors are fellow students, with the same problems and goals. Students are often less inhibited, more willing to admit to problems, more willing to try out ideas that may be less than perfect with their peers.

In creating this presentation for faculty members, what I have actually done is to change my own approach from teacher-centered to student-centered; in this case, I am the teacher and the faculty members are the students. My first lecture-like presentations were certainly teacher-centered, while the mock tutoring, set of observation questions, and discussion of the sample paper helped the faculty to discover for themselves the differences between student-centered and teacher-centered learning and the advantages of peer tutoring. And now that the medium supports the message, the trickle of students hasn't become a flood, but has, at some points in the semester, become a steady stream.

Susan Dinitz
University of Vermont

JOB OPENING

Position available for a director of an individualized skill building program in writing and reading for middle and upper school students. A background in the teaching of writing, learning styles and/or developmental reading is preferred. Contact Dale Hanson, Headmaster, Oak Grove-Coburn School, Vassalboro, Maine 04989. (Tel. 207/872-2741).

THE POLITICS OF PEER TUTORING

Peer tutors attending the Third Annual Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at Georgetown University (October, 1986) gave lively support to our belief that writing is encouraged by students working collaboratively. As Albert DeCiccio and Harvey Kail both reported in the February, 1987 The Writing Lab Newsletter, tutors showed their enthusiasm for their work in presentations and videos of their meetings with tutees. Tutors were eager to raise critical questions about theories and practices of peer tutoring. The conference dramatized how peer tutoring connects two theories central to the way we now think about writing: process and collaborative learning. The fortunate combinations of theory and practice, of teachers, theorists, and students working together, produce another significant level of collaboration. Teachers and tutors can develop questions which will lead to a form of self-reflection and group study that furthers our capacities for learning and writing--activities Garth Boomer calls "action research." Peer tutoring has the capacity to lead us in the interests of "developing the school as a 'community of thinkers'" (5).

I would like to explore the connections I have just leapt to in order to address problems which Albert DeCiccio and Harvey Kail raise. For if we are satisfied with the theories, we now need to understand the implications of our practices of peer tutoring. These are questions of peer tutors' relation to authority as a concept which underlies their teaching capacities and to authority as represented by individuals and institutions. As DeCiccio points out, as peer tutoring and tutors themselves become more experienced and successful, they may assume the "authority of knowledge supposedly generated ages ago and which . . . teachers faithfully transmitted" (3). Harvey Kail asks: "Is 'peer tutoring' an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms?" (8). How are issues of authority related to the places where peer tutors work? I would like to address these questions by first summarizing a brief history of the theories on which peer tutoring was established.

According to Kenneth Bruffee, the work of peer tutors in writing centers developed as a result of "the nearly desperate response of harried colleges during the early 1970s to a pressing educational need . . . students who seemed to have difficulty

adapting to the traditional or 'normal' conventions of the college classroom" (637). Refusing the help of graduate students and professionals, these students responded to help from peers, an activity which "harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence" (Bruffee 638). The change in social context provided the catalyst through which resistant students were motivated to activate their own learning. In turn, peer tutors learned from the perspective of teaching. Collaborative learning thus "pool[s] the resources that a group of peers brings with them to the task [to] make accessible the normal discourse of the new community they together hope to enter" (Bruffee, 644).

Peer tutoring illustrates how talking leads the writer through an understanding of the subject at hand. This dialogue enables both tutor and tutee to learn more about intellectual relationships between subjects and writing, regardless of the discipline each is studying. In this setting, what begins as a writing conference ends as discourse about varying and sometimes conflicting historical and social contexts of learning, methodologies, and of course assumptions about rhetorical strategies. As Ann Berthoff argues, learning and writing are connected by thinking and talking as a dialectic process of "looking and looking again."

The problems tutors face as they become seasoned "professionals" is reflected institutionally as peer tutoring programs proliferate in public and private colleges and universities. Originally held to share ideas for establishing new programs, the Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing is now filled with those eager to talk with others about successes, failures, evaluation, research possibilities, and curriculum development. As programs develop across a variety of institutions and diverse student bodies, questions related to these concerns will become more complex. Students at state-supported institutions in rural areas may have very different needs upon entrance and graduation than students at eastern private schools, urban commuter schools, or even community colleges. As we have seen from attempting to apply Mina Shaughnessy's pioneering work at City University of New York, we need to adjust her observations and conclusions to fit our particular settings because our basic

writers probably differ from hers.

In peer tutoring we need to be sensitive to these differences and address them in ways that serve us all well to ponder the nature of training and service of peer tutors and their relationships to fellow students. At conferences we can learn from each other's experiences, but we must not assume the lessons should be alike. For this reason, I propose that presenters at peer tutoring conferences contextualize their remarks and workshops to consider regional, cultural, and ethnic concerns of their student populations. This would not only encourage tutors from different regions to attend, but they would interact with tutors and teachers from various types of institutions. Tutors and teachers would learn experientially about relationships between writing and cultural values. The interrelationships among different cultural styles, voices, audiences, and purposes in a subject with intense impact on how we write, and which can have its most appropriate forum at a conference where collaborative learning means the sharing of academic and cultural values. Peer tutoring conferences would then encourage discussion of issues pertinent to local demographics, politics, and economics.

Peer tutoring is now central to composition and should reflect current theory as well as influence it. Conferences concerned with relationships between tutors and tutees and the cultural and regional contexts of collaborative learning and writing further research and publication of these issues. In this way, peer tutoring is folded into both practical and theoretical concerns of the study of composition, while broadening and deepening its scope.

The institutional and regional politics of peer tutoring are reflected in the individual relationships between tutor and tutee. As the three past conferences have shown us, there are several models of peer tutoring in place across the country. Each fosters different kinds of teaching and learning relationships. The most prevalent is that of employing undergraduates, graduate students, and at The University of Maryland, even retirees to serve as tutors in writing centers. Peer tutors also work with students in particular courses. For example, at The English Composition Board of the University of Michigan, we are training peer tutors to work with students in the

required junior/senior writing courses of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. In this case, instead of an hourly wage or volunteering, tutors will receive academic credit for their consulting. While there are obvious similarities in these two models, differences highlight issues about the social and political relationships between tutor and tutee, about definitions of "peer" tutor, as well as differences between peer tutoring as an institution and its relationship to models of learning.

Attaching tutors to courses is designed to fulfill principles of interactive or collaborative learning as in writing centers. At Michigan peer tutors see themselves as learning more about their major fields from the perspective of seeing their own writing in the light of the writing of tutees. In this sense, they remain students, in non-evaluative roles. Although discussion may be more circumscribed due to the continuous work in one subject area, the learning relationship may actually become more intensified as each tutor meets with one tutee for an entire term. They have an opportunity to work through methodological and contextual problems from the perspective of a single discipline but within a variety of writing assignments. In this way each learns from the other more about the subject they are both interested in. Moreover, the relationship established between the two provides a social context in which different personality and cultural styles interact continuously. Over time they will develop deeper feelings to test against their academic learning, and whether these lead to friendship, antipathy, defenses against both or an extended professional distance, they learn up close how another learns and what the social consequences are.

The more intense nature of this peer tutoring model foregrounds the delicate social and political balance of the learning relationship. Questions of authority and authorship come into play as the ongoing conferences may actually come to replicate the traditionally hierarchical teacher-student relationship. Particularly if tutors are even a year older and established majors in their fields, they may overwhelm the tutee simply by the enthusiasm they invest in the knowledge they feel they have already mastered. Furthermore, when tutors serve for more than one year and become confident about their teaching, they may

unconsciously effect postures of authority as they feel themselves to be professionals. Particularly as we encourage peer tutors to attend conferences, to design and fulfill research projects of their own, so we may encourage a double bind for them and for their tutees. For what are the social, pedagogical, political, and intellectual roles of tutees as tutors become the professionals? What can tutors feel they can learn from tutees as the latter may seem more unskilled and unknowledgeable with each passing term of tutors' experiences?

If collaborative learning is the intellectual, social, and academic philosophy on which peer tutoring is legitimized as a form of active learning, then we must ensure that its success does not trigger a monstrous metamorphosis. The energy of dialogic learning should not ossify into new forms of what Ann Berthoff referred to in her address at the 1986 Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference as "the banking model of learning." We do not want to create walking/talking parodies of the master teacher. Instead, whether peer tutors consult in writing centers or in courses, part of their ongoing training should be persistent self-reflection about how they feel as teacher/learners in relation to those tutees who should continue to be experienced as learner/teachers.

A research project for peer tutors could actually address these issues as we encourage them to become both independent thinkers and interdependent tutors. The role of evaluation in the continuation of peer tutoring must also be a process of shared self-reflection and feedback. Just as peer tutors at the Georgetown conference showed videos which became models of self-critique, so they can use this technique to ask questions about their authority and more importantly, what they are learning from the experience. How is peer tutoring sensitizing them to be empathic in the two-way process of teaching and learning? As I saw tutors worrying about how they might be claiming ownership of a student's paper by writing on it or positioning it away from the student, I could see them worrying about what and how they continue to learn from listening and filtering what they hear into questions that will not only serve the tutee, but their own learning as well.

The relationships established in peer tutoring set in motion a relationship to

social and political power that continues, particularly as it feels good to know that what one has to teach is "necessary" to a nation of literate citizens. What we need to ensure is that it feels even better to know that learning is continuous and dependent on a willingness to forego authority for challenge.

Phyllis Lassner
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CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Eleventh Annual Symposium on
Developmental/Remedial Education
New York College Learning Skills Association

April 17, 18, 19, 1988

The Nevele Country Club, Ellenville, NY
(in the Catskill Mountains)

Proposal Deadline: October 30, 1987

Contact: Susan Huard
Developmental Studies Division
Community College of the
Finger Lakes
Canandaigua, NY 14424
(716) 394-3500 ext. 389

**Fourth Annual Conference on
Peer Tutoring in Writing**

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

"The Writing/Tutoring Process"

Featured Speaker: Barry Kroll

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.

Proposals have been invited on all aspects of tutoring writing, with particular emphasis on topics which explore the conference theme, how the writing and tutoring processes intersect and interact. Peer tutors are particularly encouraged to attend and to participate in what we hope will be a weekend of informative, lively discussions and workshops.

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.-4 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.

To register for the conference, write to: Susan Umberger, Conference Division, Rm. 116 Stewart Center, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907. (317-494-7217).

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
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**USING SMALL GROUPS EFFECTIVELY IN THE LAB:
STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT
SELF-CONFIDENCE**

Collaborative learning (c1) is a popular practice in composition classes these days, and there is widespread agreement on the usefulness of students working with other students to brainstorm topics and revise and edit multiple drafts of their writing assignments. Most often, collaborative or cooperative learning is implemented through classroom work with the instructor supervising the groups as an outside observer or by meeting with each group as a participant. This pattern, however, can have two connected flaws. With too much instructor involvement, students may expect the teacher to have the final say on all questions, negating the notion of peer critiquing. With too little instructor involvement, the students (especially freshman writers unaccustomed to working with any degree of autonomy) may have great difficulty in completing their work since they are unused to working independently of the instructor and unused to working with others to complete a task. It seemed to us that a useful application of the principles of c1 would be to use Writing Lab tutors as peer group members/leaders. During 1985-86, we implemented a pilot program for freshman writers in the Writing Lab at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls that was designed to allow tutors and students to work effectively in a c1 setting.

There were two reasons for structuring this project in this way.

1. Lab tutors are not instructors, so they can honestly claim to be peer group members rather than instructors who grade work. Their status as peers can allow them to guide or focus discussions without overwhelming other group members.
2. While they are peers, lab tutors have sufficient experience in working with draft essays, sufficient knowledge of prewriting and revision strategies, and sufficient practice in communicating suggestions to provide the less-experienced students with models for responding to writing and completing group work.

From our empirical testing and interviews

with participating students and tutors, we have concluded that using lab tutors trained in cl techniques as peer group leaders can be a powerful tool in helping students improve their attitudes toward writing and their ability as writers.

The freshman students participating in this study were enrolled in a three quarter progression of writing courses which moves from personal to expository to persuasive writing. Students were drawn from regular and developmental sections. Students in the regular section scored above the twentieth percentile (a raw score above 35/100) on the Wisconsin English Placement Test; students in the developmental section scored below the twentieth percentile. Instructors of the two target sections followed the same course outline, giving the same type and sequence of assignments through the quarter. The small group leaders were undergraduate lab tutors. Funds for training, video-taping, and payment of tutors were provided by an undergraduate teaching improvement grant from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls Foundations.

To study the usefulness of cl for freshman writers, we trained seven undergraduate tutors in a particular model of cl. We began by choosing the model developed by David and Roger Johnson (1984) to provide a clear structure for achievable group work. As described by the Johnsons, cl is a learning situation in which a heterogeneous group of students must complete a clearly defined task. The successfully completed task must combine positive interdependence between group members with individual accountability. For this project, this combination of group and individual responsibility meant that students' grades on essays were dependent on group participation in critique sessions and individual efforts at revising and polishing drafts. The groups used their diverse talents and viewpoints to reach consensus decisions about essays in progress (for example, deciding on three points of revision to improve a rough draft) that each member would support. Tutors also discussed specific problem areas that students should work on with the students' instructors. Consistent use of this approach can increase achievement, stimulate cognitive development, and increase self-esteem. During the sessions, tutors "led" discussions about specific pieces of writing by encouraging students to ask questions and make

observations about the group members' drafts. Along with encouraging students to discuss the drafts with each other, the tutor's major goal was to ensure that all members received concrete suggestions about how to proceed and that all members got these suggestions within the allotted time.

Through the training period and the two quarters of meetings, we stressed to the tutors that they should establish a positive, supportive atmosphere; ask questions and offer suggestions in a way that encouraged maximum student participation and involvement; and structure each session to ensure completion of a specific task connected with a writing assignment. The tutors first worked to show students that critiquing essays included making positive and negative comments and that both types of feedback were important in assisting the writers in the group. The tutors also worked at redirecting questions about drafts to other group members and at expanding and building on brief student comments to illustrate how to give useful feedback. The most important task in incorporating the Johnsons' model of cl was to ensure that each group member received some tangible suggestions (two suggestions about expanding underdeveloped paragraphs, for example) during each fifty-minute session.

After the tutors were introduced to these concepts, they led videotaped practice sessions with members of one developmental writing class. After we reviewed and critiqued the tapes, we discussed the sessions with the tutors and reminded them of the objectives outlined below.

1. Are most students interacting?
2. Are students actively seeking help from each other?
3. Are students attentive to other students' writing?
4. Does the tutor focus, guide, and stimulate the group without over-control?
5. Does the tutor react to each student and encourage helping responses of group members?
6. Does the tutor communicate the value of working together?

It was clear that there were three important strategies for the tutors to keep in mind after the practice meeting. They had to use open-ended questions to make students extend their comments beyond a "yes" or "no"; redirect a majority of questions to group members to reinforce the sense that all members were responsible for making judgements; and encourage student feedback by praising student comments and rephrasing them to clarify a point that the student had suggested. Additionally, we reassured the tutors that they should expect some sessions that were not entirely focused or successful since the students were working in a new and anxiety-producing situation. Throughout the training, we reminded the tutors that the skills the students were using in the group sessions would develop over a long period of time and that a lack of quick improvement was not a sign of failure. During and after the two quarters, tutors, students, and instructors did in fact see improvements.

Each tutor met weekly with one or two small groups (4-6 students each) for two quarters. The groups performed a variety of tasks--brainstorming to narrow topics, discussing assigned readings, and critiquing outlines and rough drafts. The tutors met every two to three weeks with instructors to report on progress or problems. At the beginning and end of the quarter, students completed a survey of self-efficacy designed to measure attitudes about specific components of the writing process.

Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's beliefs in her/his ability to persist at a difficult task, such as writing academic essays (Meier 107). The term is related to such terms as self-confidence and academic self-esteem, but it focuses specifically on a task. Because it describes a specific situation, self-efficacy is both observable and measurable. Numerous studies report a significant relationship between perceived levels of self-efficacy and academic performance (Lent 356). Underlying the concept of self-efficacy is the idea that belief about one's ability strongly influences behavior and academic performance. This premise strongly suggests that competence in writing rests both in students' ability to identify and solve writing problems and in the strength of their beliefs and expectations (positive or negative) about the context of the activity.

We designed an evaluation survey of twenty-five statements of belief, attitude, or "feelings" that freshman writers experience (Sherer 668; Meier 112). The items were pre-tested by students, experimenters, and composition experts for face validity. Sample items included:

1. I feel comfortable when I know others will read and comment on my writing.
2. I feel confident that I can support the major points in my writing.
3. I feel confident that I can locate and correct mistakes in punctuation and grammar before I turn in the final draft of an essay.
4. When I read other students' writing, I believe I can do a good job of making suggestions for correction and improvement.
5. I feel like I can write effective essays on topics that I may know little about initially.

Each question was placed on the nine-point Likert scale, ranging from "Not at all true of me" (1) to "Very much true of me" (9). Nine of the twenty-five questions were reversed so that students could not mark all items with the same number if they were answering truthfully. The pre-test was given the first week of classes. The students were re-tested one week later; the test-retest reliability coefficient was found to be 0.86 ($r=.86$). This figure indicates that the test is a stable and consistent measuring device for beliefs about writing tasks and their component processes.

At the end of their third quarter of freshman composition (Spring 1986), thirty-seven students who had completed two quarters of freshman composition with the c1 groups were tested. One method of measuring the project's effects on students is to assess the consistency of effect. That is, how consistently did the students increase in their overall self-efficacy scores? Of the thirty-seven students, twenty-nine increased in overall self-efficacy, seven decreased, and one student remained constant. Since the probability of such results occurring by chance are less than one in twenty ($p=.05$), we conclude that

combining cl groups with peer tutoring can increase students' sense of self-efficacy about writing tasks.

Additionally we ran a second test to measure the program's effectiveness by determining the magnitude, or extent, of the influence of the activity. For this purpose, a t-test for dependent samples was employed. The results of such a test are shown below.

Magnitude of Influence of CL Activity

	Pre-test n=37	Post-test n=37	Difference in Mean (Post-pre)
Mean	133.11	144.95	11.84
Std. Dev.	19.88	19.59	
<hr/>			
T-value		4.88	
Significance		0.0001	

As shown at the bottom of the table, a t-value of 4.88 is significant well beyond the level of chance; in fact this value would occur randomly once in ten thousand times. From the results of our checks for consistency and magnitude of effect, we find that the use of cl activities in small tutor-led groups can significantly improve the ability and attitudes of freshman composition students toward writing tasks. The most important suggestion that we can offer is to make sure that instructors, students, and tutors working together all have a clear notion of their tasks and an understanding of the importance of self-efficacy in effective student writing.

Larry D. Harred and Thomas J. Russo
University of Wisconsin-River Falls

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Toward Better Writing, an annual newsletter devoted to writing across the disciplines, invites the submission of manuscripts between one and three thousand words for its 1988 edition. We are interested in descriptions and critical analyses of how writing is used and how it functions in academic settings such as classrooms, group meetings, instructor-student conferences, or tutorials. Sample back issues are available. Submissions and articles and/or illustration ideas from students and faculty are welcome. Deadline for 1988 issue: September 15. Documentation should be within text following MLA guidelines. Send two copies (and a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the return of the original) to:

Toward Better Writing
Office of Learning and
Instruction
University of Northern
Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0387

The Tutor's Corner

LITERARIA BOHEMIA NERVOSA

Writing isn't always pretty. There is an ugly side. There are dangling participles, fragments, and an occasional misplaced modifier. I've seen things done to the English language that defy description, but what description does to some student writers can make a person think twice about a career in letters. Teachers don't talk about it. Students won't think about it, and parents just can't accept it. But sometimes an assignment twists the mind and a writer, no matter how talented, will snap. Consider: students are told to go to the library to describe what they see. It sounds harmless, well-meaning, almost academic, but when it goes wrong--when the students disappear--someone has to be brave and go get them.

I'm usually that someone. But I'm nothing special. I'm just a guy with a gun and a license to bring them back alive. It can be dangerous work. Some people don't like my methods. Some people are soft. We've become a nation of joggers, Amway distributors, and right-thinking folks in Rambo jammies. No one realizes just how two-fisted the writing business can get. That is, they don't realize until things get tough. There's a saying in the writing business here at Wright State. When the going gets tough, the tough get to the Writing Center.

One of the students I was called in to find was Jake C. Browne. Jake was an all-American kid. He had a good family, a clean '69 Corvette, and clear skin. He was also something of an athlete, but he had turned down a football scholarship to Notre Dame for the opportunity to take SS 092 with Pat Kelly. Unfortunately, Jake wasn't doing well in Pat's class. Pat called him in for a "halftime" pep-talk. Jake had to get at least 18 out of 20 points on the upcoming description assignment in order to pass the course. Jake promised to describe a gas station that he had seen in Centerville. The Saturday before the paper was due, Jake rose early, slipped his Corvette out of the driveway, and vanished from his pleasant split-level in Huber Heights.

That night, I received a call from Pat

Kelly. "Something's happened to Jake."

"You'd better give me the details, Pat."

Pat told me about the assignment and about the trouble Jake had been having in class. I could tell that Pat blamed himself for Jake's disappearance, thinking that he had pushed the lad too hard. Pat and I knew better, but I could tell that he needed some moral support.

"Listen, Pat. You and I aren't in the composition business for the money or the glory. Sometimes it's a dirty job, but it's a job that has to be done. If we don't do it, who will? Where would civilization be without us? Why, the sum of English literature would be postcards, grocery lists, and bumper stickers. Is that what you want? Of course not. Now, you just sit tight, and I'll have Jake's pretty face in the front row of your class by Monday morning."

I didn't expect trouble, but those of us in the writing business don't like surprises. I decided to pack a .45, some extra clips, and teargas grenades in case the wrong people got nosy. Pat had told me about the gas station Jake wanted to describe, so I headed for Centerville.

I had been a writing tutor long enough to know that the pressure of an assignment can have strange effects on young minds. I had seen students get so absorbed in description assignments that they actually became part of whatever object they were describing. It was such a bizarre and deadly syndrome that it had been moved up to the front burner of every medical research outfit in the country. "Literaria bohemica nervosa," it was called. I wasn't much on medical nomenclature, but I knew it had claimed roughly 1,000 student writers each year since '67. I didn't want Jake to become just another statistic.

Driving on adrenaline alone, I had the car up to 85 mph. A squad car appeared in my rearview mirror, edging up with lights flashing, but the officer must have seen my Writing Center license plates because he

backed off. Soon, I came upon the gas station Jake had mentioned to Pat. It was an all-night, self-serve station, and Jake was running the booth. It was *literaria bohemia nervosa*, all right. I could tell when I walked up to the booth. Jake was actually becoming part of the Centerville gas station; he was little more than a zombie.

"Jake, I'm from the Writing Center. I've come to take you back to Wright State," I said.

"Premium or regular?" he asked woodenly.

Even through the grimy glass of the service booth, I noticed his dilated pupils and ashen complexion. I had no time to "play gas station" with this zombie if I was going to save him.

"Jake, we've got to get you to Pat Kelly. Do you remember Pat Kelly?"

"Cash or credit card?" came the automatic response.

Without much energy, Jake slid the payment drawer toward me. This almost-human in the booth was just a shell of the real Jake C. Browne, student writer. I could only hope that he could somehow be deprogrammed.

"Sorry, Jake," I said, dropping a teargas grenade into the open drawer. Jake pulled the drawer back into the booth just as the gas cartridge went off, driving him out of the booth. While he was still dazed, I snapped handcuffs on him, steered him toward my car, and locked him in the trunk. I bee-lined it to a deprogramming center just outside Kettering where I left him for intensive treatment.

On Monday I peeked into Pat's class. Jake was in the front row, as promised, showing no signs of behaving like a Centerville gas station. Pat later informed me that Jake passed the course and even inquired about tutoring. Jake was a good kid, and he had all the makings of a good tutor. I offered to write a letter of recommendation to the Academy of Letters. After all, the world needs good tutors, and some day I may be too old to do this.

Jake was lucky. The Writing Center Squad was able to get to him in time. Others aren't so fortunate. Every year thousands of students fall victim to *literaria bohemia nervosa*. Perhaps, some day science will find a cure. Until then, however, the Writing Center is their only hope. The story of Jake C. Browne was presented not to alarm, but to illustrate how this job often requires dedication, deduction, compassion,

and no small quantity of guts.

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THE EVOLUTION OF A WRITING CENTER

Last spring when a colleague and I decided to form a writing center at the small private university where we teach composition, the mechanics of organizing and staffing the center seemed at times to obscure our essential purpose: to provide a supportive instructional environment conducive to student writing, revising, and discussion of the writing process. But now, in evaluating the success of our center's first semester, we have come to view those early logistical problems as necessary steps in the evolutionary process of developing a writing center. As the Center became operational and more firmly established, we became increasingly more involved in student needs.

But at first, in order to best serve our students, we had to address the faculty and the administration. When we introduced the idea of starting a writing center, the response from the English faculty was unenthusiastic. Although few voiced outright disapproval, little was offered in the way of encouragement or support. There was, as always, the question of money. But since we envisioned a very modest center, with donated books, mimeographed work sheets and a rotating, volunteer staff, the initial funding was not really a consideration. Other objections were not so easily dismissed.

Several of the senior faculty professed a certain squeamishness regarding the implementation of yet another "remedial" university course. Low TSWE scores, combined with a tougher general education requirement (34% of the incoming freshmen and 65% of the transfer students failed the general education writing assessment exam), had already prompted the curriculum committee to include several additional basic writing courses in the fall departmental offerings. Wasn't that enough of a concession to ill-prepared students? Well, perhaps theoretically, but in fact, too many of our students were making only marginal progress in their writing. Eventually, after the Director of Writing voiced his support, the English faculty agreed to attend to the needs of its students and support the part-time and junior faculty endeavors to start a writing center rather

than to debate the theoretical validity of what some still considered a needless

Functional, though embryonic, the Writing Center opened its doors to English composition students the second week of the fall semester. Physically located in a classroom used primarily by the English Department, the Center was furnished with several conference tables, a filing cabinet, and a bookcase of sufficient size to hold our collection of faculty-donated readers and grammar workbooks. To insure "customers" (often we seemed to be marketing paragraph cohesion and structural unity) my colleague and I obtained permission to teach pilot introduction-to-writing courses. These four-unit courses met only three days a week and spent the fourth hour in the Writing Center. The Center was open two afternoons a week: Thursdays from 3-5 and Fridays from 1-3. Either my colleague or I (sometimes both) was present during these hours, along with a small number of graduate-student tutors.

As expected, we saw the usual number of poorly constructed essays, complete with illogical assertions and rambling prose, but more often than not, the students were not concerned with rhetorical conventions or structural strategies. Their concerns were less sophisticated, more pragmatic: they wanted to learn how to write passable essays. The question of creativity was put on hold while we introduced these students to the basic mechanics of prose construction, beginning with lessons in grammar and punctuation. Working with student drafts and completed essays, we discussed individual problem areas. Students were given work sheets, taught editing skills, and encouraged to keep a running tally of mechanical errors. We found that knowing what to look for was as important as knowing how to make the needed corrections.

While this one-on-one approach was effective, it quite simply occupied too much of our time. Students stopping by for less "serious" problems were kept waiting. Thus, while the tutors and I continued meeting individually with the students, my colleague began offering a series of mini-courses in basic grammar, punctuation, and sentence construction. One of the conference tables was moved to the front of the classroom to provide easy access to the blackboard. These mini-courses were announced in a weekly bulletin and soon developed a small following.

Equally popular was the drop-in availability of the Writing Center. What became more of a rule than an exception was the number of students who, while reluctant

to make an appointment to see me during my office hours, were willing to "drop by" the lab for a semi-private consultation. I say "semi-private" because even while it was possible to speak individually with students, there was seldom any real sense of intimacy that one might achieve in an office consultation. Which leads to another interesting and beneficial aspect of the Center: the relaxed atmosphere seemed to "take the heat off" the student who found office appointments too reminiscent of ominous meetings with grade-school principals and high-school deans.

As the semester progressed, more and more students discussed with us their fears and reservations concerning their ability to write: "I've never been any good at explaining myself"; "I know what it is I want to say; I just don't know how to say it." And while I'm not suggesting writing center staffs should become psychological counselors, my experiences in our writing center led me to believe they should at least be prepared to handle some amount of student self-disclosures. I have a teacher friend who discourages such "fear-sharing." "Don't tell me about your writer's block," he says. "Intentions count for nothing. Performance is all." Perhaps that is a legitimate response to more advanced writers, but I have found the misconceptions involving the writing process can be an awesome block to overcome, particularly for a college freshman who is experiencing a variety of stressful situations, both social and academic.

Encouraged by our success on a departmental level, several weeks into the semester we decided to open the Writing Center to all University students. We distributed fliers campus wide and encouraged students to participate on a drop-in basis. Once again we found our energies momentarily shifting away from the individual student towards educating the general academic community. And indeed, at first, we encountered a few misconceptions regarding the purpose of a writing center. I vividly recall the afternoon when a tall, gangly blond walked into the Center, demanded to know if this was "the place where you could get your papers proofread," and then let loose an accordion pleat of twenty word-processed pages onto the table in front of an astonished tutor. But this was the exception. Most students had generally either read our fliers or been introduced to our program by an instructor. Thus, more often than not, the students came to the Center with questions and concerns highly appropriate to our purposes.

Perhaps because the Center is located in the building which houses most of the English Departmental offerings, most of our early drop-ins were literature students. Enrolled in their first survey courses, many of them seemed particularly susceptible to intellectual self-doubts. More advanced in their writing skills, these students were used to receiving high marks for their efforts and posed a different type of challenge. While it is true that their essays were, on the whole, more mechanically sound than those student essays we were accustomed to reading in the Center, their concerns were equally pragmatic: how to write essays which say what they mean. All too often their essays were glaringly formulaic--reasonable but uninspired representations of the structured 500-word essay taught in most high schools.

So while I didn't counsel in any traditional sense of the word, part of helping these students involved an alteration in my basic instructional strategy. After listening to their complaints and administering to their bruised psyches, I made concrete suggestions about how to overcome the fear of writing. Brainstorming, free writing,

and other such creativity-tapping techniques seemed to go a long way in establishing a sense of competency in these student writers.

We are now nearing the end of our first semester. Political and organizational concerns have become less pressing, and while the mechanics of staffing and maintaining a writing center still occupy much of our time, they no longer threaten to engulf us. We would like to see more members of the Department take advantage of the Center, but we have gained a measure of senior faculty support and spend less time defining our intentions. In the future we look forward to serving a larger percentage of the University community by targeting students outside the English Department, stressing the interdisciplinary nature of composition. For now we are pleased at having obtained our initial objective of providing a comfortable and supportive instructional environment for student writers.

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