

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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**....from the editor....**

June means the end of the semester and some vacation time for all of us—including the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. So with this issue, the newsletter ceases publication until September. During the summer I'll be reading through and tallying your responses to the Reader Interest Survey that was enclosed in the April issue. The purpose of that survey was for me to learn more systematically how the newsletter could be more useful and responsive to everyone's needs, and I've found from browsing through those surveys that some things about the newsletter format will have to change. For example, despite the small (very small) minority of us who like publications on colored paper (to brighten up our mailboxes, identify current issues more easily, and locate older issues in files), the vast majority of this group does a lot of duplicating of articles from the  
(see page 2)

**The idea of a center for writing and speaking**

I am often perplexed by reports of our students' great natural fluency in speech. The upshot of those reports generally is that loquacious speech stands as the great available resource for our students' laconic writing. Such notions about the relationships between writing and speaking may be today's great unexamined assumption in ordinary operations of writing centers. That may be the real point of Peter Elbow's stimulating, problematic essay, "The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing," published in CCC in 1985. At the same time, quality of speech often is a matter of great interest to administrators, faculty members, and students. In my experience, members of all three of those groups are polarized by the merits and liabilities of elocutio adapted from Aristotle or something else vaguely derived from James Dean. For writing centers, all these circumstances make questions about speech and writing a promising area for exploitation in practice and exploration in theory.

I was director of a writing center at a major university when I was hired to create one at The Cooper Union, a small, private, all-scholarship college of art, architecture, and engineering. There the central administration, at the urging of its Humanities Department, initiated planning for a writing center, and that administration stressed instruction in speech for its potential value in career placement. The Humanities Department had long made oral reports a part of its own first-year requirement, which was an introduction to literature in place of any English composition course. Like most schools in these disciplines, engineering at Cooper Union emphasized spoken presentations while art and architecture relied heavily on verbal "crits" in the studio. The student body, quite understandably, expressed interest in supplemental support for these speech tasks. Also, a significant number of foreign-born students candidly admitted the value of instruction in standard English speech as part of their general acclimatization. Hence,  
(see page 2)

....from the editor....

(cont. from page 1)

newsletter, and copying machines are apparently unable to cope with colored paper. And I didn't realize how those staples at the sides of issues were snapping people's fingernails and their patience when prying open pages to read and to copy ( sorry). So, no more side staples.

From your survey forms I learned not only how much the newsletter is copied but also how widely each issue is distributed. Responses to the question about how many people read each issue were startling, as large numbers of us responded that between ten and thirty people read each issue (which means that I'm going to have to investigate funding for more durable paper). Apparently issues are read by writing lab directors and tutors and then sent to other instructors, department heads, deans, other administrators, and even college presidents to help them learn about our writing lab world and its very obvious professionalism and accomplishments. Those looking for ways to convince their administrators might also want to consider passing along copies.

The surveys also indicated how busy we all are as very few of us want newsletters longer than sixteen pages or articles longer than three pages. ("This is the only publication I read immediately," was a common refrain.) Somewhat surprising was the response to interest in articles on computers. While some of us are actively involved in this, large numbers indicated little or no interest in anything related to computers. Job notices will, in the future, appear in very brief form as, once again, the readership for those is small. (Are we a contented group not interested in seeking greener grass?) And some minor irritation expressed about deadlines in announcements being too close to the time that the notices are read might, I hope, provoke those who send in announcements to do that with a bit more lead time.

Finally, for those who are planning to add some writing to their summer agendas, there were numerous suggestions in the surveys for topics that ought to appear in the newsletter. Look over that list (on page 15) to see what you can contribute. As for me, my summer reading includes a stack of books on desktop publishing. I'll be looking for ways to enhance visual readability as well as ways to respond to all of your helpful suggestions. And profuse thanks for all that lavish praise for the newsletter, praise that really belongs to the writers of all the articles which you find so

useful.

Have a pleasant summer, one that I hope includes some well-deserved R&R. And don't forget to keep sending in your articles, announcements, names of new members of this group, and those always appreciated yearly \$7.50 donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University and sent to me) to:

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

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### *Idea of a center*

(cont. from page 1)

this new facility for tutorials and small workshops on communication skills was conceived from the outset as The Center for Writing and Speaking.

I began operation of that center with some trepidation because speech skills seemed the sort of thing ordinarily farmed out by English departments to some kind of post-McLuhan clan in studios or to solicitous outside agencies. But incorporating speech tutorials and workshops into other writing center activities immediately proved to me to be entirely compatible with writing centers' ideas of themselves. In fact, speech work made more of writing centers' ideas of themselves.

Speech as a model and a metaphor for writing, of course, comes down in the writing process era at least as far back as Lev Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*. In general, the model uses speech to cover phases of the composing process central to writing center tutorial activities: invention and the intricacies of addressing an audience. In addition, speech as a mode for composition and communication has been seen as a means to authenticity as least since Robert Zoellner's essay "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition" appeared in CCC in 1969. For Zoellner and others, the social quality of communication, desirable in writing and demonstrable in speech, was seen as a powerful inhibition of the developing writer's tendency to banality and over-generalization. All these kinds of speaking models of the composing process quite obviously lend themselves to the writing center tutorial, where the reader is not implied but palpable. The speaking skills of tutors have been anatomized in the criti-

cism of our field, but we might better deploy the complete power of the metaphor of speech as writing with more attention to the speaking skills of tutees.

At Cooper Union, because of the first-year requirement, the tutors met many requests for help in preparation of oral reports for class. That help was provided in listening— that easily forgotten but fundamental aspect of tutoring writing. If tutee material is presented in oral form, tutor concentration on content and explanation is rarely distracted by the “surface errors” we generally decline to include among our principle interests. That work on oral reports quickly generated an equivalent for tutorials on the composition of essays. Now students are asked to read what they have written; discussion immediately focuses on the kinds of failures usually recognized by tutees in the course of an exposition on “what I meant to say.” These requests to have tutees read aloud what they have written, and to read it well, do, as Zoellner argued, discourage students from writing what no self-respecting human being would ever utter. This tutorial mode of reading is more in the nature of conversation than that of oratory; tutor responses focus more on questions of clarity than on mannerisms of public speaking. The question of clarity isolates weaknesses of expression easily carried over into editing activities.

Attention to quality of speech can also add to the activities of most writing centers. Our students have requested “coaching” in public speaking, a matter best pursued in small workshops. These workshops, not individual tutorials, have the bailiwick of fundamentals of slickness in delivery, such as posture or eye contact. These workshops enhance the atmosphere of the writing center by creating an activity more social than individual tutorials. In addition, these workshops tend to attract tutors, from areas such as theater as well as public speaking, who themselves enhance the ambience of the place. At Cooper Union we also offer small-group workshops on “American English Speech,” a title suggested by the ESL-speech specialist contacted to conduct them. These workshops have developed a loyal following among foreign-born students, especially Oriental students with extraordinary skills in mathematics and sciences. Convinced by these workshops of the value of the writing center, these students often return for their first individual tutorials on written assignments.

Finally, attention to speech skills can also add to the classroom activities of a writing center.

In the coming semester The Center for Writing and Speaking at Cooper Union will, on request, provide tutors to observe panel presentations in engineering courses. Outside of class, these tutors will offer instruction on preparation of the texts for presentations and on the actual delivery of them. In that way a class wishing to emphasize speech skills can offer optional instruction on them without sacrifice of class time.

All of these activities directed toward spoken as well as written presentations can serve to add to the activities of writing centers without in any way infringing on our usual, by this time almost traditional, activities. In fact, as I saw when tutorials on oral presentations improved ones on written compositions, these speech activities can improve the quality of our usual work. A Center for Writing and Speaking can resurrect that last and now most disreputable stage of Aristotle's writing process, delivery, without slighting those first three stages now most hallowed. In his important essay “The Idea of a Writing Center,” in *College English* in 1984, Stephen North persuasively argued that talking was the very essence of the writing center process. But speech is also one of the principal products demanded of our students. For the practical necessities of students and of our own facilities, and for the theoretical provocation of speech's entanglement with writing, now is a fortuitous time for exploration of the idea of centers for writing and speaking.

John P. Harrington  
The Cooper Union  
New York, New York

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## Improving students' writing attitudes: The effects of the writing center

Writing center advocates are convinced of the benefits of writing centers and of tutoring. However, little research has been done which clearly demonstrates these benefits. This study was designed to ascertain the effect writing centers and peer tutoring have on the attitudes of student writers.

Writing center's influence on writers' attitudes is important because students with lower apprehension have been shown to write more fluently, producing more words, sentences, and paragraphs (Book), and to perform better in

spelling, punctuation, modification, fragment recognition, and diction (Daly, "Writing Apprehension"). In addition, John Daly ("Effects") and R.J. Garcia have shown the writing of high apprehensives to be of lower overall quality.<sup>1</sup>

The writing process is equally affected by an apprehensive attitude. Cynthia Selfe, for example, found that high apprehensives engaged in little written pre-work, did less planning, and did little editing and revising. Low apprehensives also elongated planning time (Bannister).

Current research, therefore, indicates that students' attitudes and apprehension affect the fluency, linguistic maturity, and quality of their writing. Are writing centers and peer tutoring having a beneficial effect on the attitudes of student writers?

### **Methods and Design**

Changes in student writers' attitudes over the semester were recorded. The changes in attitudes of students who did and did not visit the writing center were then compared. In addition, the attitudes of students who received peer feedback in class were considered.

Data were collected at Davis and Elkins College during the fall semester, 1986. Students in all first-year writing courses (two sections of basic writing and six sections of English composition, one designated an honors section) were given Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew's "Writing Attitude Scale." The scale includes twenty statements which the student responds to on a Lichert-type system. Scoring the positive and negative statements produces a numerical representation of the student's attitude. Scores range from negative 40 to positive 40, higher scores representing better attitudes, zero representing a neutral attitude.

Controlled selection of participants was not necessary since all students were given the survey. The students completed the scale immediately at the beginning of the first class meeting in order to achieve an accurate rendition of their attitudes, limiting the amount of teacher interaction before the scoring. Students were again administered the scale during the last class meeting of the semester, but one section of English composition was not included in the exit scores when the instructor refused to cooperate. A total of 121 students, 23 from basic writing and 98 from composition, took both the entrance and the exit

surveys.

### **Results**

The results of the attitude survey are given in Table I (see page 6). Sections 1 and 6 were basic writing. Section 4 was an honors section of composition. Sections 5 and 6 were taught by the same person, but all other sections were taught by different instructors.

The "N=" column shows the number of students in each section. The "September Mean" column indicates the mean entrance attitude scores of the students, the "December Mean" column the exit scores. The "Percent Increase" column indicates the percentage of change between the two scores. The last two columns indicate the number of students who improved their attitudes and what percentage of the whole the improving students represented.

Section 1 was taught using workbooks and lecture instruction, paragraph writings graded individually. Section 2 used a samples reader for class discussion and also graded individual compositions separately. Section 3 tried to promote student thought during in-class exercises yet focused on surface errors as grading criteria. Section 4, the honors section, was taught as an introduction to English literature course. Section 5 was a writing workshop where class time was devoted to conferencing and writing. Sections 6 and 7 depended on peer review and portfolio grading to evaluate the writing.

Tables 2 and 3 (see page 6) separate those students who did not visit the writing center from those who did, showing information which compares to that in Table 1.

Table 4 (see page 6) indicates the relationships between those students who received peer assistance in the writing center or the writing classroom and those students who received no peer assistance. In Table 4 students from sections 6 and 7 are combined with students from other sections who used the writing center to produce the peer-helped figures.

### **Discussion**

Several observations become immediately evident. First, the mean scores for all students increased, regardless of section, method of instruction, or writing center attendance. This

tends to indicate that the act of writing for a reader, even if that reader is only the teacher, tends to improve attitudes. Practice alone apparently positively influences attitude.

Second, the overall improvement scores for all students (Table 1), for non-writing center students (Table 2), and for writing center students (Table 3) all indicate that approximately two-thirds of the students will have improved attitudes at the end of a class. Method of instruction and writing center attendance do not apparently influence the rate of improvement.

Third, the most significant difference between writing center and non-writing center students is indicated by the amount of attitude improvement recorded. Students who did not visit the writing center improved their attitude scores by an average of 74 percent, but students who did visit the writing center improved scores by 124 percent. This would indicate that, while writing centers don't improve the attitudes of any more students than would otherwise be improved, writing centers do make for greater changes in the writers' attitudes.

Table 4, however, offers the largest improvement discrepancies. Forty-seven percent of those students who did not receive peer assistance improved in attitude by an average of 31 percent. In sharp contrast, 73 percent of those who did receive peer assistance, either in the writing center or in peer response groups in the classroom improved in attitude by an average of 181 percent.

### Conclusion

The figures indicate that writing centers do have a positive effect on the attitudes of students who visit the facilities. This changing of attitude alone should justify the continued existence of writing centers. And if, as previous research has demonstrated, there is a relationship between writers' attitudes and the quality of their writing, then writing centers can be seen to have a significant, beneficial effect on both writers and writing.

The figures also indicate that it is not the writing center itself which positively affects attitude as much as it is peer response. If all writing courses employed peer response in their design, writing centers might be phased out for students enrolled in those courses. This does not mean, of course, that writing centers would no longer be needed; their service could be re-directed to con-

tinue to assist students preparing writing assignments for courses other than freshman composition.

The study seems to support two conclusions. First, writing centers are performing a valuable service by contributing to the improved attitudes of student writers. Second, as more process-oriented teachers begin to use peer review in their freshman writing courses, writing centers must adjust to increasingly serve a community of writers outside English department composition courses.

Kevin Davis  
East Central University  
Ada, Oklahoma

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### Note

<sup>1</sup>For a complete discussion of the relationship between writer apprehension and writing characteristics, see Daly, "Writing Apprehension."

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**Table 1: All Students**

	N=	Sept. mean	Dec. mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	14	8.14	8.79	8	7	50
Section 2	25	8.08	11.21	39	15	60
Section 3	18	9.01	13.39	49	13	72
Section 4	11	9.73	18.18	87	8	73
Section 5	23	5.35	11.57	116	15	65
Section 6	9	4.33	11.22	159	6	67
Section 7	21	2.05	12.43	506	18	85
Totals	121	6.53	11.55	177	82	68

**Table 2: Non-Writing Center Students**

	N=	Sept. mean	Dec. mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	8	11.25	8.75	-22	3	38
Section 2	23	8.91	11.30	27	13	57
Section 3	14	9.43	14.35	52	10	71
Section 4	11	9.73	18.18	87	8	73
Section 5	1	8.00	15.00	87	1	100
Section 6	1	1.00	22.00	2100	1	100
Section 7	20	2.20	12.30	454	17	85
Totals	78	7.52	13.10	74	53	68

**Table 3: Writing Center Students**

	N=	Sept. mean	Dec. mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	6	4.00	8.83	121	4	67
Section 2	2	-1.50	10.00	766	2	100
Section 3	4	7.00	8.00	14	3	75
Section 4	0					
Section 5	22	5.23	11.41	118	14	64
Section 6	8	4.75	9.88	109	5	63
Section 7	1	-1.00	15.00	1600	1	100
Totals	43	4.67	10.46	124	29	67

**Table 4: Peer-Helped vs. Non-Peer-Helped Students**

	N=	Sept. mean	Dec. mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
helped	64	4.44	12.47	181	47	73
not helped	57	7.51	9.84	31	27	47

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# Tutor's Column

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## The non-native English writer

"If I could only say it in my own language" is an almost standard expression in conversation involving non-native English speakers. In saying so, such speakers simultaneously beg for understanding and apologize for their inability to effectively put their message across. "I am not communicating in my language; excuse my linguistic awkwardness," they seem to say. Hidden behind this appeal is an even more important message; "I may not be able to communicate in English (your language), but I have a language in which I can communicate effectively." This sort of constant apologizing (verbal or non-verbal) helps save non-native speakers from embarrassment that their inability to communicate effectively may cause them. It is a way of putting distance between them and the embarrassing moment.

There is another way in which language inability provides a distance between non-native speaker and message. When speakers revert to their own languages, socially unacceptable words are better said in English. Once again the speaker camouflages an intention by putting distance between the self and what is said.

In this case, however, the emphasis may not be so much on how something is said, but on what is said—i.e., upon content. It is a way of refusing or avoiding to take responsibility for one's communication because blame is assigned, through the use of a foreign word in a foreign context, to a foreign culture.

The paradoxical approaches described above say something about the relationship of language and thought and how the latter is always embedded within a cultural context. This essay is not about spoken language, but about this relationship between language, thought, and context and how language manifests itself as an impediment to the effective expression of non-native English writers. I base this on my observations while working with fellow non-native speakers in the Paideia Tutors Program at Luther College, which involves fifteen peer tutors in writing, as well as on my own struggles with the English language.

Like the distressed speaker in the first example above, the non-native English writer often laments the loss of meaning inherent in any

translation. She longs for a word-to-word translation of her thoughts—a translation which captures all the nuances of her own language. Indeed until a non-native speaker is able to capture nuances of her new language, she is operating at a low level of meaning. She may know a lot of words in English which she can use to make up grammatically correct sentences, but the sentences are no more than skeletons that convey partial meanings and are largely devoid of feelings.

The relationship between language, thought and cultural context manifests itself clearly in "thought papers," i.e., papers that require philosophic thinking. It did not take me long to notice that a Southeast Asian student's paper on philosophy was the result of two distinct thought processes: his thoughts in English and those in his own language. The paper made confusing references to experiences outside the immediate English language context without any effort to interpret them. The theme of the student's paper was that life is hard, but that this ought to encourage persistence rather than abandonment of struggle. Yet to understand this student's paper meant spending time with him, hearing him tell about his experiences with a communist takeover in his native country and his subsequent flight to America. Only after hearing that long history was I able to help the student. It became obvious that not only patience, but also empathy were prerequisites in helping him improve.

The best advice to most new users of the language is "think in English"; the only better cure is longer exposure to the language. I've often tried to experiment with myself in order to determine the relative amount of time I spend thinking in English and my own language, Oshiwambo. I found this hard to determine, because after all, "think in English," ultimately means "think English" (i.e. like the English). When one gives such advice, many times new speakers answer, "You have been speaking English for a while now; I am new at it." But here the speaker retreats to the defense mentioned at the beginning of the paper: "It is not my language"—a self-defeating defense, I should add. Thus, encouraging the student to think in English while writing is important, because once alerted to the danger of doing otherwise, the student will start making a conscious

effort to stop translating, an effort which will pay off in the long run.

There are advantages to having non-native English tutors help with the writing program. They can connect to the student's experiences and easily empathize with the student's efforts. The student is reminded of the fact that she is not "dumb" because of her communication handicap and can improve with hard work. It is also important to note that such students are already experiencing some level of culture shock, and tutors need to be sensitive to that fact.

In addition to the more general problems of the thesis, topic-restriction-illustration, documentation, etc. that plague all new students, the non-native English writer experiences some unique difficulties. They say that until one starts dreaming in a foreign language, one cannot claim to speak—or write—it well. It is a long journey to such a destination. In the meantime, students should be advised against spending their time agonizing over "If I could only say it in my language" and to instead wrestle with "How can I say it in English?"

Ella Ndatega Kamanya  
Tutor  
Luther College  
Decorah, Iowa

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## Conversation workshops for second language learners

Almost forty percent of the students who visit our writing lab in the SEEK Developmental Skills Department at Hunter College speak English as their second language. According to our recent survey, students represented all parts of the world, and had lived in this country for approximately four years when they entered college. They illustrated varying degrees of second language control, and most needed further help with English. Upon college entrance students took writing/reading tests and were placed in one of three levels of ESL writing courses, a sequence which they had to successfully complete before they could enroll in freshman composition. Although highly motivated, some ESL students progressed slowly and repeated writing courses several times.

One of the problems, we theorized, related to our students' limited use of the second

language. Many ESL students did not speak English in their daily lives. They spoke their native languages at home with their families and often continued this practice in their neighborhoods, which were microcosms of their native lands. At school, students "hung out" exclusively with friends of similar ethnic backgrounds, again speaking their native languages. In classes, these students were too shy to participate. They sat in the back of the room and eschewed conversation with teacher or classmates. Many of our ESL students, therefore, had slight opportunity to practice the language of their new country.

Our students' limited knowledge of their new culture also harmed their academic success, curtailing their comprehension of lectures and readings. A recent article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* by Campbell and Web alluded to the problems of ESL students who were expected to understand American history and social issues (6). In addition to their problematic grasp of factual information, our ESL students also illustrated unrealistic perceptions of their new culture. A teacher in the department reported a recent conversation with her students about American dating practices. Her students suggested that after one or two dates an American couple should be ready to decide about marriage.

Therefore, we searched for a way to help ESL students gain insight into American culture, as well as language fluency, and we decided to try informal conversation. While researchers had not fully illustrated the relationship between oral and text fluency, many ESL teachers believed that students who spoke a language with ease would also write it with more proficiency. Scholars agreed. Vann, for example, suggested that students who were learning a new language must receive practice "decoding the language both in speech and writing" (166). This also matched recent theories of children's language development. Children are said to need lots of practice with oral language skills in order to develop their writing skills (Kroll, 44).

Two years ago we initiated the conversation workshops. All ESL students were invited to join small groups in the writing lab for informal conversation. We scheduled a one-hour workshop and sent announcements to teachers and counselors. We also put notices in the college newspaper and tacked posters on



all bulletin boards. When students registered for writing tutors, we screened them and strongly encouraged those who needed oral practice to register. As the conversation workshop continued, students heard about it through their friends and came in to register.

Unfortunately, the planned hour did not fit many students' schedules, so eventually we added another workshop, and now offer Conversation Workshops at three different times each week. Before lab registration each semester, we block out three hours for conversation, including prime times in the morning and early afternoon. Although students are allowed, even encouraged, to attend all three workshops, they usually register for one weekly session for the entire semester and remain there. Students may, however, switch around. A student who registers to attend on Tuesday afternoons, for example, may occasionally attend instead on another day. These switches cause no problem because the workshop is organized into small groups which can contract or expand slightly without creating scheduling problems.

One tutor is assigned to four students for the conversation hour. We initially chose writing tutors who were outgoing extroverts, and we still find them most able to keep conversation flowing. We also try to recruit students of varied ethnic backgrounds who speak English fluently to act as role models. Before participating in the workshops, undergraduate peer tutors undergo training with the ESL coordinator to become sensitive to the fears of second language students and to learn some basic techniques. For example, tutors learn not to correct students' pronunciation unless requested, not to act as interpreters for those who are shy or difficult to understand. Students must be encouraged to talk to each other. Tutors also learn to act as facilitators who initiate the conversation, if necessary, and insure that all members participate. Then they learn to practice the gentle art of listening.

We mix students of all nationalities together, trying for broad representation within each four member group, because we found that several students from the same background bonded together and spoke their first language, as well as excluding those from other backgrounds. For the same reason, we usually suggest that two friends who appear dependent upon each other when they register

might prefer to join separate groups.

We experimented with placing students together who appeared to be at the same language level, but we stopped this practice since participants often defied easy placement. We also recognized that students of differing achievement formed more dynamic groups. Those with greater fluency were tolerant of those with more limited skills, and they sometimes helped each other.

Topics have evolved from trial and error, as well as suggestions from teachers, tutors, and students. Group members usually begin by introducing themselves and presenting autobiographical information. Conversations about cultural differences are popular; participants compare practices among their native and adopted countries. In succeeding weekly sessions, students contrast practices in dating, parent-child relationships, schooling, and other subjects on which they can share information. Another popular topic concerns the similarities among the folklore of different countries.

Tutors can choose between many types of material. At the beginning of each semester

(In our ESL conversation groups) talk is always expressive and informal, allowing students to take risks using the language.

they receive several group exercises which serve as "ice breakers." One is a game which offers each participant an imaginary \$2000 to shop for such items as total self-confidence, a dynamic personality, political power, or a multitude of friends. Students enjoy explaining how much they are willing to pay for each of these qualities. Another more serious game requires participants to pretend they are hospital administrators and decide from a set of biographies of very ill patients who should be allowed to use the one available life-saving machine. Of course, they have to explain the reasons for their choice and try to convince the rest of the group. Another excellent conversational source is *The Book of Questions*, a new book that asks open-ended questions about ethical behavior and includes a few more frivolous subjects. Further into the semester, tu-

tors often initiate conversation about social issues such as abortion, gun control, capital punishment, and the homeless. They clip articles from the newspapers or sometimes use essays on history and government. Students are encouraged to initiate topics for discussion.

Yet talk is always expressive and informal, allowing students to take risks using the language in ways that they could not do in more formal or evaluative experiences. We have found that the conversation workshops are well received by students who enjoy the informal, relaxed conversations and by teachers who believe the hours fill a gap in their students' educational lives.

Teri Haas  
Hunter College  
New York, NY

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### Conference on basic writing

The Conference on Basic Writing is a special interest group of CCCC for teachers and researchers who work with basic writers. CBW sponsors a meeting at CCCC each year, publishes a newsletter, and organizes other activities focusing on basic writing. Membership, including a subscription to the *CBW Newsletter*, is \$5.00 per year. Checks should be made out to the Conference on Basic Writing and mailed to this address: Peter Adams, English Department, Essex Community College, Baltimore, Maryland 21237.

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### A reader asks. . . .

I am planning to develop a three-credit course to train tutors to tutor writing at Harrisburg Area Community College. I would be interested in any useful tips, course syllabi, article tips, or any especially successful course assignments. I am planning to spend the summer developing this course. Any help I can receive will be most appreciated. I am also willing to share what I come up with too.

James Boswell, Jr.  
Harrisburg Area Community College  
Arts 214E, 3300 Cameron Street Road  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17110.

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### Job openings

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#### Louisiana State University at Eunice

A position as an instructor, to begin 8/23/88, is announced. Preference given to candidates with the completed doctorate, with some teaching experience, and with experience working in a writing laboratory. Contact Dr. James Ware, Head, Division of Liberal Arts, Louisiana State University at Eunice, P.O. Box 1129, Eunice, Louisiana 70535 (318-457-7311).

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#### Columbia College Chicago, Illinois

##### Writing Center Director

Opening for fall 1988. Writing specialist, rhet/comp, basic skills, or TESL background preferred; evaluation/assessment and/or CAI experience a plus. Will further develop and administer existing college-wide peer tutoring program. For further information and/or to send letter of application (and complete dossier, including names, addresses, and phone numbers of three references, no later than July 15) contact Dr. Philip J. Klukoff, Chair, English Department, Columbia College, 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60605-1996 (312-663-1600).

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## Learning to teach by tutoring

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One of the beneficiaries of tutoring in the writing lab is the prospective college teacher— not an undergraduate peer tutor who may or may not be interested in a teaching career but a graduate student who will probably be appointed to an assistantship in the freshman writing program when an opening develops.

At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the Writing Program sponsors a modest tutorial service which is staffed entirely by graduate students, some of whom are already teaching in the Program, others of whom are on a waiting list. The latter group, who have not yet encountered the freshman writer in a classroom, here come face to face for the first time with particular problems that demand direct and immediate intervention. Since one-on-one meetings between the student and the teacher are also an integral part of our freshman writing course, the graduate tutors receive early and intensive practice in the management of the conference. But most of the lessons derived from tutoring are relevant to the whole teaching experience, however organized. Tutors learn at first hand about the anxieties of the student writer (which may not always be visible in the structured environment of the classroom), about the evolution of process to product, and about the relationship between author and critic— knowledge that they will later acquire in the classroom but at a somewhat greater cost. Learning will take longer and will often be sacrificed to the exigencies of classroom administration.

Students may be referred to the center by the instructor or they may drop in. (A number of tutees are non-native speakers of English, and their requirements are often very specific, having to do with mastery of the language.) I should say at the outset that the drop-in clients represent a wide range of abilities and performances. Tutors therefore see a cross-section of the kinds of writers— good, fair, and poor— that they will work with in the classroom. For the prospective teacher it is the drop-ins who provide the most illuminating examples. These students visit the writing lab because they themselves, not the instructor, have already identified a problem. The problem may not be real, or it may not be the same problem that the instructor or the tutor will recognize. Sometimes the paper is far more thoughtful and analytical than the writer believes. But the tutor must take seriously the fact that the writer perceives a need. In encouraging students to define their

problems and to explain their difficulties in solving them, tutors receive a valuable introduction to the processes of invention and organization as they are reflected in the answers to specific questions. Since tutors are not familiar with the assignment, they are obliged to make the student responsible for clarifying the problems. Of course, good instructors ask the same kinds of questions, but the temptation to define the problems, even when students are capable of uncovering them, is probably greater for the one who has prepared the assignment to meet a particular objective. As classroom instructors, the former tutors may remember the virtues of a restraint imposed on them in the writing lab.

Students almost always come to the tutor with a complete essay, not necessarily a final draft, but one which is intended to represent a comprehensive response to the assignment. Perhaps the most frequently asked questions suggest that the emphasis for both instructor and student is the grand design. This question takes several forms: "How can I improve this essay?" "How can I get my point across?" "What's wrong with my paper?" As a pedagogical concept, writing as process or a series of operations sometimes threatens to overwhelm the significance of product. But many students who come to a tutor want to examine the shortcomings (or the strengths) of the total presentation; to the writers it resembles a picture, an object governed by a unitary principle, whose features must be apprehended simultaneously before being submitted to analysis. In other words, the authors are interested in global changes.

Given such overarching demands, the tutors come to see their task as rather different from one of attention to particular detail. Later in the classroom they will be likely to encourage students to think of their essays less as a series of steps to be undertaken as discrete elements than as an enterprise devoted to discovery of a master design. Tutors do not, of course, minimize the importance of the steps that must be taken in the process of revision. Nevertheless, the questions that they ask will reflect concern with a large and unifying objective.

In addition, the student papers that tutors examine offer an introduction to the kinds of subjects that students write about— those they themselves choose (so-called "free" subjects) or those that are assigned by their instructors. The

tutors are, needless to say, enjoined from criticizing the instructors' assignments, but the subjects can be eye-opening, lessons in what to avoid as well as what to incorporate into future lesson plans. After several conferences tutors can begin to recognize a pattern of subjects, both free and assigned, that are unsuccessful; the products are boring, flat, and uninspired. (Many of these turn out to be discussions of the situations with which students are most familiar—experiences at school, for example.) Other assignments are clearly successful in eliciting interesting and thoughtful papers. This exposure to a program-wide catalogue of subjects, issues, responses, student strengths and weaknesses tells tutors a good deal about the actual conduct of the writing program; it serves as an invaluable complement to the lectures and workshops all appointees attend as a part of their teaching training.

Not surprisingly, student writers may speak about their needs much more frankly and openly to the tutors than to their instructors. The latter, no matter how friendly and supportive, are nevertheless ultimately responsible for evaluation and grades, an intimidating prospect for students who are unsure of their performances. Students will sometimes disclose to the tutors an ignorance they are unwilling to reveal to their instructors—a failure to understand a reading or an assignment, even an admission that all the assignments and their purposes have been utterly mystifying. Such disclosures provide tutors with an insight into the distance that may exist between instructor expectation and student ability or readiness.

Of course, some graduate tutors may discover that, after all, teaching freshman students to write is not the rewarding vocation they anticipated. They may conclude that they lack the skill, energy, optimism, patience, or tact that teachers must draw upon endlessly in order to succeed in this formidable enterprise. The writing lab offers a relatively painless way to inform graduate tutors of their own readiness or lack of readiness for a larger stage.

Annette T. Rottenberg  
U. of Massachusetts-Amherst

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## Triage tutoring: the least you can do

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Ball State students are facing mounting pressure to succeed in writing. The university requires a grade of "C" or better in required composition classes and dismisses students who do not pass the course in four tries. Furthermore, all students take a writing proficiency exam during their junior year. Passing this exam is also a graduation requirement. As a result of these pressures, the Writing Center has been unusually busy this year: the number of students seeking regular weekly help has increased; the grammar crisis line clangs constantly—the number of calls as of last week was 185, compared to 98 all of last fall; and more students than ever are coming to the Center on a walk-in basis for immediate, one-shot help—by November 2, 348 students had walked in, an increase of 73 over last fall's total number.

These last students pose the greatest challenge and the least satisfaction of all possible tutor-peer relationships: these are the students who dash in breathlessly, plop a typed paper in front of the tutor and say, "Read this. Tell me if it's O.K. It's due in an hour." This crisis format presents a frustrating contrast to the ideal tutoring situation, the one I am certain most bright and willing students imagine when they apply for positions as tutors. In the ideal scenario, the needy student attends weekly one-hour sessions with the tutor. During the quarter, the two develop a bond and rapport based on the student's developing skills as a writer. The tutor estimates progress, shares the transient defeats, and revels in the final success of the student on his or her path to learning to write, on the path to passing composition.

But the walk-in student has no history and often no context. The tutor who is on duty probably does not know the professor's expectations or the subtleties of the assignment. Yet, before her stands a student. Here on the desk, rests a paper. And on the wall above the clock ticks relentlessly towards the hour of reckoning.

For reasons that must include kindness, generosity, and good nature, our tutors often feel responsible for the final quality of this paper and failure when the student leaves fifty minutes later, still clutching a lousy essay. Often the tutor's only choice if he or she is to make a real difference--a difference that will ensure a good grade--is to edit, an unholy act, strictly forbidden in our Center. As

a result, we have had to face the least you can do and still accomplish the development of some writing skills in this hopeless emergency. Short of ripping the pen from the student and thwacking him with it, there are satisfying ways of dealing constructively with this student's work. "Constructively" is the key concept here; its root is "construct" which means to "build," to "form," to "frame," to "devise." Notice that it does not mean "to fix for." Thus, the tutor must focus on the paper in a way that forms, builds, frames, devises the student's understanding and application of important principles of writing; the most significant of these principles is that the responsibility for the paper's improvement is the writer's, not the tutor's.

To describe our approach, I have borrowed the word "triage" from the medical procedure which efficiently and automatically organizes decision making in an emergency: in a disaster involving serious and fatal injuries, patients are placed into three groups according to the extent of their wounds: some need immediate help or they will surely die; others need help but can wait; still others are beyond help. In order to make these judgments, the medical professional must adjust his attitude to be coolly analytical, detached, rational. He must be willing to ignore hopeless cases and to move quickly, without looking back, to a treatable wound.

Fortunately, our crises are a bit less dramatic, but one might not think so when the walk-in students burst in asthmatically gasping for help. The tutor must snap into the triage mentality. This involves immediate and implicit acceptance that some features of the paper can not be saved. Acknowledging the situation's limitations, imposed by the student's last-minute demand for help, the tutor now explains to the student: "Since your paper is due so soon, I can help you only a little bit, and you may not earn a good grade. But given the time limit, I will help *you* to improve the paper."

With the burden for success where it belongs—on the student—the tutor turns to a cool, efficient analysis of the paper. She reads it *aloud* to assess its *major* strengths and weaknesses. These she lumps into three categories:

- I. Purpose/Unity
- II. Development
- III. Grammar/Mechanics/Spelling

Style and organization, audience and tone infiltrate all aspects of the paper and are, thus, too

large to consider in this emergency: the focus must be on the three large areas which can be adjusted.

Often, the emergency walk-in student carries to us a paper with devastating problems in all three areas. Now the tutor must use triage to gain focus. She will click through a checklist to determine which of the three areas can be improved immediately: Can she help the student clarify the purpose in ten minutes? Can a wandering paragraph be brought into line with the thesis? Can examples, description, evidence be added to the development of one paragraph? Does a particular grammatical error predominate? Which of the three areas stands the best chance of improvement in the forty remaining minutes? After the analysis of the three areas, the tutor gives the student a summary of the potential of each for improvement and asks him to choose the order of treatment. The paper's success or failure belongs to the student. Once focused, the tutor and student begin to improve the selected area.

Triage tutoring—the least you can do—will not transform weak themes into brilliant essays. But it does provide an effective offense to the tutor placed in a defensive situation. Some students will not accept limited help and will stalk off. Still others will not want to redo portions of what they consider a finished paper. But these writers, after all, have not allowed us to help them. Some, we hope, will accept limited help, learn a little, and return under more promising circumstances the next time. But in all cases, the responsibility for improvement is the student's. We affirm our willingness to help but, more importantly, we affirm the expertise of writing tutors whose role is to guide students in learning to write, not to secure passing grades for mysterious strangers.

Jane Haynes  
Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

### A reader responds....

For those of us who have linguistic difficulties with "tutor/tutee," Joanne Smith, the Writing Lab Director at Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg, offers the following:

There are two kinds of people who blow through life like a breeze,  
One kind is gossipers, and the other kind is gossipees."

—Ogden Nash

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## The study lady

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I started out as director of a study skills program and ended up as an advice columnist. "Dear Study Lady," students ask, "I can't concentrate. What should I do?" "Dear Study Lady, I read whole chapters and then can't remember a thing." "I have three papers due, and writer's block has got me down." "I study all night, then forget it all during the test." Teaching study skills at Emory University, I found that students—though they voiced the classic student questions and complaints—were reluctant to attend study skills workshops or seek individual help. So I began writing "Dear Study Lady" and let the campus newspaper take the information to the students.

Superficially, the column is a collection of hints and techniques for making studying more effective. However, I hope to do more. First, I sneak in tidbits of learning theory here and there so students can begin to build a conceptual framework within which good study habits make good sense. In response to a question about lecture notes:

"What usually happens to class notes? You go to class and write like a maniac, act as if every word is the world's most precious jewel. Then you close your notebook and don't touch those pages again until two nights before the midterm. What a waste! Five weeks later those notes have become an archaeological expedition. You have to piece together concepts from a shadowy memory and a scrawly page. You're starting from scratch in memorizing details. Some notes just plain don't make sense.

Today, on the other hand, the concepts are fresh. The notes still mean something. It may take you 5 or 10 minutes to reread them, mark key ideas and facts to be memorized, clarify confusing gaps and squiggles. This way, you prevent those precious notes from sliding through the sieve of your short term memory. The process of organizing and marking them will teach you most of the material. What you don't learn now will be both legible and familiar next month."

I also attempt to address students' perception of who they are as learners. They tend to see themselves as passive swallows down of someone else's information, *takers* rather than *makers* of class notes.\* Responding to a student whose

professor expected "critical insight" on the midterm:

"Consider the two-year-old. Give her any object with more than one part: she pulls it to pieces, bangs the parts together, flushes a section down the drain. That's what you want to do with a text. Take it apart. Wallow around in it until you can articulate the author's thesis, identify the steps in her argument, place it in the context of the dragons she's out to slay. You may even want to throw some parts down the drain, but first clarify, clarify, clarify. You don't want to start slinging opinions about before you take a rigorous look at what's there. Don't let yourself be intimidated by the terminology. 'Critical insight' isn't some secret game in which only the teacher knows the rules. The Greek *kritos* simply means able to discern or judge. It's a habit of seeing with discernment that we seek. For children, examining the world is a passionate, lustful kind of activity. What we're talking about is a patient and habitual refinement of an urge that's basic to us all."

Study skills have become more accessible on the Emory campus. Getting through the door at the gym or the library—anywhere that I have to present my I.D.—can become a major undertaking: "Oh, you're the Study Lady. By the way, I have this test coming up. . ." I've delivered fliers to a dorm on a Friday night and been grilled with study questions—while other students were dancing to a loud rock band outside. A supportive administration has charged me with giving a "Study Lady workshop" to all freshman advising groups. The persona of the Study Lady has at least shortened the distance at Emory between the help that is available and the students who need it.

Recently I began to make the column available to other college newspapers, inviting learning centers to use it as a means of promoting services on their own campuses. Columns are also available in pamphlet form. For information, you can write c/o Emory College Office, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322.

Nancy-Laurel Pettersen  
Emory University  
Atlanta, GA

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\*Thanks to the Harvard Bureau of Study Counsel for the concept of *notemaking*.

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## What topics interest writing lab people?

Interested in writing an article for the *Writing Lab Newsletter*? Included here (in no particular order) are some of the topics suggested in the Reader Interest Survey included in the April issue of the newsletter:

- physical layout(s) of model writing labs
- discussions of how tutors are paid
- research projects (including tentative and incomplete ones)
- research on writing lab directors (Who are we?)
- news from other writing labs (anecdotes, strategies, special achievements, etc.)
- specifics on tutor training (e.g., handouts, other materials)
- integration of reading and writing basic skills
- reviews of conferences
- humor, short fillers
- quick tips
- using computer-assisted instruction in the writing center
- tutoring ESL students
- suggestions for increasing student use of the lab
- teaching one-to-one with texts in other areas (music, art, athletics, etc.)
- lists of labs willing to exchange materials through the mail
- statistics of lab usage when describing different programs
- information on how students' progress is tracked after working in the lab
- tutoring developmental writers
- responses to articles, debates
- research on collaborative learning
- strategies to promote and maintain interest in the lab and to get more teachers to use it
- letters to the editor
- observations on how certain problems were handled
- a newsletter equivalent of "Dear Abbey" ("I have this problem...")
- philosophy of tutoring
- position of the writing center as a resource in writing across the curriculum programs
- specific strategies for learning disabled students, for writer's block, and

for students who hate to write more on professional tutors

- tutoring reading
- politics of writing labs as part of their departments and schools
- ways to organize a writing contest
- description of a lab set up: environment, equipment, staff, paper
- work, advertising, visibility on campus, what they like about their set-up and what they'd like to change
- funding, grants (and evaluation ideas for grant purposes)
- integration of the lab into freshman composition
- trends in the field
- theoretical taxonomies and their ramifications for practice
- research reviews
- tips for teaching tricky items such as parallelism and tone
- the relationship of the lab with a learning center (cooperative? adversarial? cautious?)

## NCTE statement on high school writing centers

In their 1988 Trends and Issues Statement, the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Composition includes the following statement:

Writing centers in high schools are a positive trend when supported by an informed philosophy of composition. However, such centers are only as good as those who staff them.

## Newsletter on College Teaching

*The Teaching Professor* is a newsletter covering practical nuts-and-bolts of classroom teaching, philosophical discussions of pedagogy, and formal research on college teaching. Subscriptions are \$29 for 12 issues per year. Contact Magna Publications, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704-3006.

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## Call for Conference Proposals

**CUNY WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION**  
**City University of New York**

**Tutoring Writing: At the Cutting Edge of Knowledge**

**November 18, 1988**  
**Roosevelt House**  
**Hunter College, CUNY**  
**New York City**

Presentations or workshops may address any aspect of tutoring writing or of writing centers. We welcome individual or group presentations from faculty and administrators, but we also wish to encourage writing tutors to participate.

Deadline is September 15, 1988; notification of acceptance by early October.

Send a one-page abstract indicating method of presentation, anticipated audience, and length of time to Teri Haas, Co-Chair, Department of Academic Skills, Hunter College, 695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021 (212-689-4450).

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

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