The WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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....inside....

....from the editor...

In this first issue of the new year, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* takes on a new look through the magic of desktop publishing. For those who are also considering this brave new world of bits and bytes, some advice from a weary, befuddled novice. For your initial attempts, plan to spend about three or four times longer than you thought you would; be prepared for bewildering glitches no manual will help you with; and if at all possible, have on hand a knowledgeable friend or spouse willing to spend an unreasonable number of hours to bale you out when a page won't print, when random lines of text refuse to stay within the column guides, and when you have no idea of what to do next.

But despite the new appearance, the newsletter continues to be your usual forum for exchanging comments, suggestions, and ideas. Please send your articles, reviews, announcements, names of new members of the 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

YOU'VE GOT TO PLEASE YOURSELF OR WRITING IS A GARDEN PARTY

Before my graduate studies were interrupted by the Second Punic War, I read some stylistic speculations about authors' voices. Since then I've had a smattering of linguistics, and now I'm beginning to get familiar with the ideas of the major schools of composition theory. Maybe the problem is that I've been scratching too many surfaces, but I still haven't found an explanation of why I write the way I do, or any advice about audience that can be conveyed to a novice writer in twenty words or less. This bothers me for two reasons—because everyone seems to agree that audience presents the biggest problems to beginners, and because I can't expect my tutors to engage their clients in long-winded theoretical discourses on the subject (the tutors would quickly lose their audiences if they tried). So what is Johnny to do?

I take Peter Elbow's article on the subject in the January 1987 issue of *College English* as an indication that writing authorities have reached a point of desperation. He concludes that many students (and some teachers) face such a variety of mental audiences—even including ghosts from their past—that exorcism is their only option. Thus the need for free-writing, invisible writing, etc. But these techniques are not practical for writing centers, unless they have very light traffic and very patient students who couldn't care less whether they meet a deadline. Furthermore, I'm not even convinced that such strategies are desirable. After all, as Peter Elbow himself and others have pointed out, some audiences (such as the memory of a supportive teacher) can be helpful. Blocking out audience awareness, then, seems to me less useful than developing a sense of an always supportive audience, and I think that tutors can help others to do this.

Whatever our theoretical biases, I think that we all recognize that some students seem to be "naturally" good writers, while others achieve

success only by hard work and long experience. But however they arrive at it, all successful writers must finally share something fundamental in common, and I believe that it's a sense of a supportive audience– not a "yes" man or woman, but someone whose criticisms are constructive and trustworthy, and whose praise is highly valued. The question, then, is "Who is this audience?"

In this connection I recall a remark by F. Scott Fitzgerald to the effect that whenever he wrote, he heard himself speak with maturity and even wisdom. This puzzled him, of course, given the poverty of judgment in his personal life. It doesn't seem so puzzling, though, from the standpoint of audience. As a husband, he played to Zelda, and even his friends were not the sort to encourage the best in him. But as a writer he played to a superb judge of literary merit, one who could be trusted to know quality when he saw it– a demanding audience, but one whose approval was worth struggling for.

The only audience I can think of who was capable of encouraging the kind of style found in *The Last Tycoon* is Scott Fitzgerald himself– not Zelda's companion in their reckless, self-destructive behavior, but the man he was capable of being at his very best. I also think that the principle holds for every writer.

But if my audience is myself, how can I write formally to one audience and informally to another? How can I write one kind of letter to a company president (which I have never been) and another kind to my double-first cousin twice removed, if I'm always addressing the same audience? The answer is (1) that I have my formal moments and my informal moments, and (2) that it is much easier for me to imagine myself in Mr. Iacocca's position than it is for me to imagine him, a stranger to me, in a position that is also strange to me. In the first case, I have only one leap of imagination to make, however great it might be. But in the second case, I have to make that same imaginative leap about social position, plus a second leap about someone else's personality.

And usually that personality is not even identified for students in academic writing. Imagine Johnny's perplexity when he is told to write to a "general" audience!

The problem of audience is greatest with beginning writers, but it isn't limited to them. When is the last time that you've picked up a literary journal without finding at least one article filled with such drivel as "Postulating a Weltanschauung of ontological reification in mitigation of James' moral severity . . ."? Either the author has no sense of audience, or else he has an inadequate personality.

It's important, then, to clarify this issue early with our students. We can't do much about their personalities (which may be one reason why some people will never write well), but we can tell them that it's pointless to try to write for a general audience or their teachers (which are usually the real targets of their essays). It would be more effective, I think, to tell them to write to themselves as the students that they are or can be (friendly and intellectually honest– not eraser throwers). This approach should not only reduce writer's block, but also prevent the abstract muddle that we often see when students try to write to impress someone. (Do you like to read articles, Jane, written by someone who tries to impress you with his superior vocabulary. Do you like Howard Cosell?)

I would have a difficult time explaining this to someone who thinks that Perry Como is the governor of New York, but I have seen tutors explain something to students in one sentence that I had struggled with for twenty minutes. Tutors have a clear advantage over us in being able to communicate with other students conversationally. Once this concept of alter-ego is eventually explained to tutors and they understand it by examining their own state of mind when writing, peer tutoring may take a big stride forward.

It may well be that what Peter Elbow is doing when he tries to shut out audience awareness is, in fact, simply freeing up his alter-ego from the clutter of other audiences. In any case, I think that in writing centers we would do well to encourage students not to try to eliminate the sense of audience but to try to identify the audience more accurately. Nor should we try to teach students how to write for a wide variety of audiences, but rather how to imagine themselves in different situations. As the man said, "You can't please everyone, so . . . ."

William Pendleton
Randolph-Macon College
Ashland, VA

THE WRITING CENTER AND PEER TUTORING: SOME OBSERVATIONS

As we know, collaborative learning has been institutionalized in the modern writing center and peer tutor. In discussing these adjuncts to classroom composition pedagogy, however, we confront the nagging question about the community to which novice writers are being reacculturated. Is peer tutoring in the writing center *the blind leading the blind?* Or is Ken Bruffee correct in asserting that, "by working together—pooling their resources—[peer tutors and novice writers] are very likely [enabled] to master [normal discourse[1]] if their conversation is structured indirectly by the task or problem that a member of [the literate community, that is, the teacher who has formulated the task according to the 'formal conventions of academic discourse and of standard written English'] provides?" ("Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" 4) Though scholars currently debating this issue have not yet reached consensus, many do agree with the following assertion: In both the writing center and the peer tutor we may observe the positive results of collaborative learning, which is the institutional counterpart of the social nature of thought.

At first, writing centers grew out of a desire for rededication in writing. They were, according to Maxine Hairston, "*ad hoc* measures to try to patch the cracks and keep the [traditional] system running, [places] which [gave] first aid to students who seemed unable to function within the traditional paradigm" (82). In "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984), however, Stephen M. North argued that the writing center changes writers, not texts. He disparaged those who wanted to make it a place that deals with "mechanical problems" or that carries "the ball for mechanics" (436). He asserted that the center can foster a positive, supportive environment in which learners are enabled to take risks. From this point of view, writing in the center is considered in the broadest context—not as a narrow skill to be sharpened by drill and exercise, but as an act of thinking, discovering, learning, and communicating.

Dialogue between reader and writer is essential to such exploration, the ultimate goal being internalization of this dialogue in the maturing writer or thinker and his or her work. North explained:

> Maybe in a perfect world, all the writers would have editors—who would . . . ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. A writing center is an institutional response to this need . . . . [It is] simply one manifestation—polished and highly visible—of a dialogue about writing that is central to higher education . (441)

Thus, the goal of today's writing center is to give students the opportunity to collaborate with others and to explore with them various strategies for coping with the frustration that comes when an individual paper *doesn't seem to be going anywhere.* Using some of the strategies espoused by theorists like Roger Garrison, Donald Murray, and especially Bruffee,[2] writing center personnel attempt to reacculturate writers to a community of learned writers and reacculturate themselves to the problem-solving strategies endorsed by such a community that keep the writing process moving. The modern writing center therefore suggests that writing is a social or collaborative act.

The heart of most writing centers is the peer tutor. Peer tutoring has its roots in a theory and method of learning called *andragogy. Andragogy,* Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar assert in *The Tutor Book* (1982), "assumes that [students] can and do take increasing responsibility for their own education" (xv); it maintains that students help each other learn through a dialectical process. Peer tutoring is thus a form of collaborative learning—an institutionalized method of "developing and focusing a resource that many of the more traditional approaches to teaching composition overlook: peer influence" (Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing* 1).

Initially, according to Richard W. Williams, peer tutoring was a logical resource for helping teachers accommodate the individual student differences they encountered in the classroom. For Williams, peer tutoring provided additional instruction both inside and outside the classroom (2). More recently, advocates have begun to get excited about "the plenitude of thought and activity" that peer tutoring prompts in writers. For instance, while Director of the Writing Center at Queens College, Judith Fishman had the opportunity to observe her tutors. She has provided the following account of one

such observation:

> Beverly read and she wrote and she shared her work– she took the first steps and [the novice writers she tutored] followed, quietly, slowly, out of the safety of their isolationism and into a working group. . . . They read together, aloud, they observed together and listened to each other's writing . (10)

Where before student writers like Beverly's had worked out schemes to avoid work, they are now being nudged by other student writers into a collaboration of work.

Fishman and others are coming to see what Bruffee means by collaborative learning and peer influence. He has explained that peer tutoring is one form of collaborative learning, that tutors create "conditions in which people learn to talk with each other about writing the way writers talk to each other about writing, and learn to write as those in the community of literate people write" ("Peer Tutoring" 13). He has adopted Richard Rorty's idea that learning may very well result from a shift in a person's relations *with others.* [3] And he has advanced the theory that learning sometimes involves loosening ties in one community in order to join others, defining this process as reacculturation. Bruffee has acknowledged that the process is extremely difficult to undergo alone, and has said that peer tutors serve as a support group, a kind of transitional social unit. What practitioners like Fishman are now observing is that peer tutors can reacculturate students to the community of writers they are trying to celebrate. Further, theorists like David Klaus, who have evaluated the peer tutoring phenomenon, are arguing that peer tutoring brings about academic gains for the tutor, academic gains for the tutee, and social growth (1-2). For many others as well, peer tutoring, an institutionalized form of collaborative learning, is helping to actualize what some in the academy have always desired– the construction of knowledge and the empowerment of those involved in that process.

Institutionalizing collaborative learning in the writing center and through peer tutoring is an acknowledgement that reading and writing are essentially social or collaborative. But among advocates of writing centers and peer tutoring, there are disagreements that still must be settled. For instance, recently there has been a movement toward decentralizing the writing center, using tutors to establish co-curricular or writing across the curriculum programs. But in the process, Bruffee's notion about peer influence and North's idea about a *ready auditor* have been modified.

The Writing Fellows Program run by Tori Haring-Smith at Brown University typifies some of the unsettled issues facing those involved with writing centers and peer tutors. Clearly, Haring-Smith's program is one of the better examples of the use of collaborative learning in a writing across the curriculum program. Haring-Smith recruits fellows on the basis of their advanced writing skills and trains them in a rigorous course in the theory and teaching of writing. The fellows are then assigned to writing intensive classes throughout the university, and they work with all preliminary drafts the writers in those classes prepare. The fellows do not meet face-to-face with writers before a draft is completed. Instead, they collect the writers' drafts and displace into writing their comments about the drafts. Later, after the writers reconstruct their original drafts, they may meet with the fellows to discuss the comments and the paper. To be sure, Haring-Smith's program ensures that the individual student writer recognizes that a text affects others, that it can be modified and improved as a result of collaboration.[4] However, the mini-teacher quality of the writing fellow, the fact that the collaboration is, predominantly, in the form of a distant or displaced conversation (written comments), has bothered those who believed with Bruffee that students write effectively when they can sustain a conversation with those they know best: their peers.

To be fair, we must acknowledge that the phrase peer "tutor" has always been rather oxymoronic.[5] In the following passage, Thom Hawkins writes an idealized description of the tutoring contract: "The tutoring contract is productive because there is a reciprocal relationship between equals, a sharing in the work of the system (for example, writing papers) between two friends who trust one another" (66). Yet, even Hawkins agreed with Bruffee that the tutor had to be trained or to be in training to help writers at every stage of the composing process. The tutor has to learn the language of the community of literate writers so that he or she may serve as a local representative of that community when engaged in conference with a novice writer. Otherwise, the tutor will be reluctant to attempt criticism, feeling that he or she may be "ratting on a friend" (Bruffee, "Two Related Issues" 78). Through carefully organized

instruction in the practice of peer criticism (as Bruffee means it),[6] tutors are prepared to be local representatives of the larger community of learned writers. As North says, "they are listeners and readers trained to offer responses that keep writers moving" ("Training Tutors to Talk About Writing" 439). This kind of training and the fact that tutors are usually selected as a result of their advanced writing skills suggest that Louise Z. Smith may be correct in asserting the following: "so-called peer tutors are by definition NOT—nor can they usefully pretend to be—the referred students' peers in writing skill, experience, or confidence" (4). In between Hawkins and Smith are those like Muriel Harris, who have proposed that the tutor is a hybrid—sometimes co-laborer, sometimes coach.[7] Though by no means the last word in this ongoing debate, such a notion makes a good deal of sense. The tutor as *peer*, showing sincerity and sensitivity, facilitates a constructive dialogue with the student that might otherwise be mannered and strained with an instructor. The tutor as *coach*, through a process of questioning and of providing directive strategies that have been tested in the larger community of literate writers of which he or she is a local representative, ensures that this dialogue is translated into consequential discourse.

The above discussion is the result of two questions: Should teachers ask student writers to compose for a community comprised of their peers, of professional writers, or of some combination of these agents? Is the tutor who works in the *writing center*, a peer, a mini-teacher, a hybrid combination of the two? Only further research will bring to forums like this one more definitive answers. For now, our observations indicate that, in eliciting conversations about writing and in providing support to novice writers as they attempt to join in the ongoing conversation of humankind, *peer tutoring*—a form of collaborative learning that often takes place in the *writing center*—is a valuable institutionalized extension of the social nature of learning.

Albert C. DeCiccio
Merrimack College
North Andover, MA

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Notes

[1]See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). "Normal discourse is Rorty's term (based on Kuhn's "normal science") for the kind of discourse that occurs in a literate community.

[2]See Roger Garrison, "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," *New Directions for Community Colleges* 2 (1974): 55-84. See Donald Murray, "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," *College English* 41 (1979): 13-18. See Kenneth A. Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).

[3]See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[4]Tori Haring-Smith's Undergraduate Writing Fellows Program at Brown University is in its fifth year, and is becoming the model for more and more schools interested in cross-curricular or writing across the curriculum programs. See Tori Haring-Smith, et al., *A Guide to Writing Programs* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985): 15-16 for a description of the Brown program.

[5]Haring-Smith asserted that"peer tutor" is an "oxymoron" in a speech she gave, entitled "Bumblebees Flying, Per Tutoring, and Other Things That Aren't Supposed to Work," at the Second Annual Conference for Peer Tutors in Writing, Bucknell University, October 25, 1985.

[6]See Kenneth A. Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).

[7]Haring-Smith offered the hybrid notion of the tutor in her speech at the Bucknell Conference.

Tutor's Bulletin Board

To: Tutors Within Driving Distance of Maryland
From: University of Maryland Writing Center Tutors

We have so enjoyed our tutoring conversations and socializing at tutoring conferences, most recently at Purdue, that we want to do more. Some of us are considering packing up our sleeping bags and traveling to visit and learn more about tutoring programs at other schools. If you'd be willing to give us some time and floor space during our Spring Break, March 12-20, please let us know. Please contact:

Shoshana Konstant
The Writing Center, English Department
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
(301)454-4011 (work)
(301)474-7613 (home)

We'd also be delighted to house and entertain any tutors who wish to visit College Park.

CALL FOR PAPERS

"CREATING THE CURRICULUM:
Theory and Practice in Writing Program Administration"

Council of Writing Program Administrators
Annual Summer Workshop/Conference
August 3-5, 1988

Salve Regina College, Newport, Rhode Island

The conference welcomes proposals for panels or for individual presentations devoted to the problem of the curriculum in writing program administration. Each proposal should include:

- a title and brief description suitable for publishing in the conference program
- an abstract of no more than 500 words for each presentation
- your name, address, institutional affiliation, and phone number(s)

Please send proposals to John Trimbur, Department of Humanities, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA 01609. The deadline for proposals is April 1, 1988.

Tutor's Column

LEARNING FROM TEACHING: A STUDY OF WRITING TUTORS

Introduction

"It's difficult to tell who learns more in the writing center, the tutee or the tutor," writes one of the twelve writing center tutors who participated in a survey I conducted recently to determine whether writing tutors' own writing changes as a result of tutoring others in the writing center. It was a question I had asked myself many times over the semester I worked in the writing center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Description of Survey

Twelve students who had spent at least one full semester tutoring in the writing center were the subjects of this survey. Eleven of the twelve were either English or writing majors or minors. The twelfth was a nuclear medicine major. Eleven were female. One was male.

The questionnaire which formed the basis of this survey was designed to elicit subjective responses regarding the tutors' experiences in the writing center. Three of the twelve respondents were also chosen at random for an oral one-to-one interview to expand the information from the questionnaire.

The questionnaire asked the tutors not only about their own writing and their background in writing but also about their experiences in the writing center. The tutors were asked to write as much as they liked in answering each question. The interviews consisted of questions specifically about the tutor's own writing.

Because the questionnaire was set up to be answered in a narrative rather than a simple yes or no answer, the entire questionnaire had to be analyzed to determine the answer to my primary question: "Do you feel your writing has changed in any way as a result of your tutoring in writing conferences? If so, how has it changed?"

Response to Survey

Writing tutors here are often English majors with writing ability and a strong desire to help other students write better. However, the writing center tutors benefit at least as much as the tutees from their experience in tutoring others in writing. According to the responses to the survey, the time the tutors spend reading tutees' writing helps them become better readers of their own writing. Several of the tutors responded that identifying various problems in tutees' writing helped them recognize that they were having some of the same problems in their own writing. One participant said, "I often see mistakes in tutees' writings that I also was guilty of (misspellings, misplaced modifiers, etc.). I am more aware of my weaknesses, but I more often used this as a teaching tool by saying 'I make that same mistake.'" Several tutors indicated that by reading tutees writings they had learned to be more objective and self-critical in their own writings. Another tutor indicated that she felt better able to work things out in her writing simply by seeing the writing center tutees work out problems in their papers.

All twelve tutors indicated that they had learned about dealing with people as a result of their interactions in the writing center. As one tutor wrote, "I have helped dry tears from students' eyes, I have witnessed a tantrum, and I have seen numerous students earnestly working to improve their writing skills." Several of the tutors wrote about their rewarding experiences with foreign students. One tutor, herself from another country, stated, "Working with other foreign students helped me to build self-confidence in my writing. Many of these students had the same difficulties I had to write in English and we worked together on some of these problems." Still another tutor said she had learned "patience" as a result of working with foreign students because of their patience in learning to write English.

Only one of the tutors indicated that she spent most of her time helping students "gain confidence." The rest of the tutors indicated that they spent the majority of their time helping students get a focus on their writing, develop organization skills, improve sentence structure and sharpen grammar skills.

I did not attempt to "test" the tutors to see whether their writing actually did improve. But clearly their perception of their ability to write did

change and their confidence improved. One tutor stated, "Working at the writing center has helped me become more confident in dealing with people on a one-to-one basis . . . I feel more comfortable with helping students, with using a word processor, and with writing myself."

Basically, the tutors felt they had grown in how they read their own writing as a result of tutoring in the writing center, particularly in their abilities in proof-reading, revising, and editing. One tutor stated, "I have become a much better proof-reader and have learned to read my work very closely. Before tutoring I read my work as Kathi, the writer. Now I have learned to read my work as Kathi, the reader." Another tutor commented, "Before the writing center I felt offended if my reader said he was lost or he didn't understand what I was trying to say. It looked obvious to me. By reading others' writing, I realize a writer has the tendency to assume too much knowledge. Now I know the 'so what' question has to be answered. It has also helped me to organize more logically which helps the reader."

Discussion

There seems to be little doubt that both tutors and tutees learn in the writing center. Keeping in mind that this survey was subjective and answers to it were freely given by the participants, the answer to my primary question is a resounding yes. Tutoring the writing of others increases the tutor's confidence in her writing and often changes the way she reads her own writing.

Judy Hornibrook
Peer Tutor
University of Arkansas at
Little Rock

13th Annual Rhetoric Seminar
"Current Theories of Teaching Composition"

Purdue University
May 30 - June 10, 1988

Contact: Janice Lauer
Dept. of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907
317-494-4425

WHAT'S AN ASSISTANT TO DO?

In August 1986, I was hired by Livingston University as Assistant Director of the Writing Lab. Actually, this was intended to be merely an interim position. I was to spend this year "learning the ropes" from the departing director, who had decided that he would be happier teaching in his own field: 18th Century English Literature. As an "apprentice director," I had much to learn, but I had no clearly delineated duties, mainly because there had never been an assistant director before. I realized, therefore, that the only way I would find out what an assistant director does was by learning as I went along.

During my first month as assistant director, I took my title seriously: I wanted to learn as much as I could, as quickly as I could, about the daily operation of the writing lab so that I could be an assistant in the true sense of the word. Since the director was not sure what was in his province to ask me to do, I took the initiative and volunteered a lot. I watched him and the graduate assistant for awhile and then chose the simplest tasks as the ones I would master first. I booted up programs on the computers for students, turned off the computers at the end of the day, answered the phone, and put materials away. Eventually, I began to feel like an over-educated and over-paid student helper, although I was fully aware that I would not be qualified to tell others what to do next year until I had some hands-on experience with the "nitty gritty" side of the writing lab.

After "feeling my way around" the lab for a month, I decided that it was time for me to begin assuming some of the director's responsibilities. Needless to say, in my enthusiasm to be helpful, I overstepped my bounds. For example, I offered to tutor several students whom the graduate assistant had been tutoring on a regular basis. On the other hand, this "negative" experience was beneficial because it helped to define the limitations of my position. In addition, the director himself restrained me with his reminder that he was the person who was ultimately accountable for what transpired in the writing lab. Having been sufficiently humbled, I resigned myself to the conviction that the best service that I could provide was simply to "fill in" during those periods when the director was unable to be in the lab because of teaching duties, committee work, or emergency situations.

My attitude toward my role in the writing lab changed once the director began asking my opinion on certain matters. Since writing labs were my field of concentration in graduate school, he believed that my expertise would offset his ignorance regarding such matters as ways to improve the writing lab. My suggestions, such as sending tutors along with the college representatives on their visits to area high schools to promote the lab as a selling point for the college, were always taken seriously. As time passed, the director and I collaborated on solutions to problems that previously he had to solve on his own. Not only did I assist him with time-consuming tasks, such as providing him with questions for the various exams that the director is required to administer for the English Program, but I also acted as a sounding board when he had to make policy decisions, such as how to talk to a work-study student who was not doing her job. While it is true that the director had occasionally consulted his student tutors about policy matters, there had also been some situations involving other faculty members or administrators which ethics forbade him from discussing with students. Since having another faculty member to talk to made him much more confident about some of the difficult decisions he had to make, he assured me that two heads were indeed better than one.

A faculty member who has some knowledge of or experience with the operation of a writing center probably possesses some specialized skills that would be difficult to find in a graduate assistant or a peer tutor. During my second quarter as assistant director, I often busied myself with tasks that the director had not gotten around to performing because of time restrictions. Reviewing the writing lab's holdings is a chore that many directors tend to put off because so many other priorities seem to be more pressing. As soon as the director realized that the computer software library, the handout file, and the book collection hadn't been reviewed for over two years, the job naturally fell in my lap. In a sense, I think that the director and I revitalized that lab by "weeding out" old books and ordering new ones, by writing handouts for recurring grammar problems, and by searching through computer catalogs in an effort to update our software. Replacing these materials required that I become involved in another essential but time-consuming enterprise that is usually the sole province of the director: grant writing. We decided that the best way to simplify this complex process was for each of us to write approximately half of each grant; consequently, we have written twice as many grants as the director wrote by himself last year, thereby allowing us to supplement our meager budget.

Performing my duties was probably the best way to discover the limitations of my role; on the other hand, by contrasting the position of assistant director with that of co-director, I also discerned several reasons why the position of assistant director is more beneficial to the university, to the director, and to the assistant director. First of all, since the assistant director is a subordinate of the director, the university probably does not pay the assistant director as much as it pays the director. In my case, I was not paid anything because I was essentially working in an apprenticeship capacity. The position of assistant director is appealing from the director's viewpoint because the director has more control over an assistant director than he/she would have over a co-director. Finally, the person in the position of assistant director does not have to shoulder as much responsibility as a co-director; consequently, the position is ideally suited to the "apprentice" who is not yet qualified to act as co-director or director.

Maybe because of the fact that tutoring is strictly a private affair or because of the distance between some writing centers and the English Department office, writing center directors tend to find themselves isolated most of the time. Although student tutors can be consulted on some matters, there are many occasions when the expertise and professionalism of a fellow faculty member are indispensable. Admittedly, except for writing centers that are in periods of transition, such as mine, there are very few writing centers that can justify the expense of providing the director with an assistant, not to mention a co-director. However, the services that I was able to provide as an assistant director have convinced me that once I begin to feel "lonely at the top" next year, I will petition for my own assistant.

Alan Brown
Livingston University
Livingston, Alabama

FOR YOUR LAB'S LIGHTER MOMENTS

If you'd like a belated gift for your writing lab or a book of examples to illustrate the effects of careless, incorrect writing, consider purchasing a copy of the *Columbia Journalism Review*'s newest collection of newspaper gaffes, a paperback entitled *Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge* (Perigee, $5.95). The first entry, from a Kentucky newspaper reads: "Literarcy Week Observed." If you want an example of the implications of misplaced modifiers, you can ponder the headline in an Arkansas newspaper: "Sisters Reunited After 18 Years in Checkout Line at Supermarket." Or consider the reaction of a victim of an accident in Buffalo, New York who read the report: "Jerk Injures Neck, Wins Award."

"Dismemberment Killer Convicted," said a Massachusetts paper which put a prosecutor's comment in boldface: "Thank God the jury could put the pieces together." Or for those who think punctuation rules are merely excuses to harass them, there's the California paper which announced, "Garden Grove resident naive, foolish judge says." And consider the astonishing medical news reported in a New Mexico paper: " 'Mild' Fertility Drug Produces Quadruplets in 3 Minutes." And then there's the California paper which reported: "Police Kill Man with TV Tuner." And the Illinois paper which announced: " Crowds Rushing to See Pope Trample 6 to Death." Or the even more difficult feat headlined in an Iowa paper: "Gates Asks Reagan to Recall Name."

This paperback belongs in every writing lab– and not just for light amusement.

A COUNSELING APPROACH TO WRITING CONFERENCES

A burden of power often troubles our attempt to teach writing in conferences, those times when we are placed in an intimate and collaborative setting with students. Often neither we nor they are prepared for this way of teaching and learning that plainly differs from what usually happens in the classroom, with its rows of aspirants sitting at the feet of the teacher. The power structure of the classroom seems out of place in a conference and can hamper the kind of teaching required then.

To help ease the transition from classroom to individual tutoring, we should consider using a counselor's approaches to structuring and conducting an interview with a client. The one-to-one conference is the primary work place for psychological therapists and counselors. Much of their professional research and training is devoted to understanding what happens then and to developing techniques for making conferences work. We can and should tap this profession's know-how.

By dividing the helping process into distinct stages, each with its own goals and techniques, counselors carefully bring about the conditions for a helping relationship, one in which the counselor works collaboratively with the client to discover his or her capacity to deal constructively with life, thereby giving that person the power to resume control and move forward. What follows is an adaptation of these stages to the helping relationship between student and tutor, one which also has as its goal putting someone back in control – the student writer.

Stage one is <u>preparing and entry</u>, when the tutor tries to open a conference with a minimum of resistance from the student, a resistance often caused by the fear of confronting weaknesses in front of a stranger. There is also the student's discomfort in knowing that the work ahead will be difficult and will require change in the way the student sees himself or herself as a writer. An apprehension toward change because of its threat to a fixed ego structure can be a deep source of anxiety for young writers.

A second goal in the entry stage is to establish an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy. Techniques include little touches of welcome– saying "good to see you", offering a chair, asking to take a coat– and also a minute or two of talk about the student's background, both personal background and in relation to writing. This talk relaxes the student, humanizes the tutor, and can indicate academic or personal difficulties that may interfere with the student's writing.

An obvious goal in the next stage of <u>clarification</u> is to determine the assignment and where the student is in the writing process. But too often we stop here. After establishing this information, an effective helper should then also clarify the goal of the conference at its outset. Counselors call this "process clarification." The tutor could say, for example: "What I want us to

do now is read over your draft to determine if it answers the assignment before we start making any changes." This sort of announcement is important because it removes a student's doubt and confusion about what will happen in the conference and when. Often new students expect a tutor to simply begin helping them to correct a paper. Clarifying the process of a conference can remedy these misconceptions before they interfere with the tutorial.

Another goal in the clarification stage is to elicit the student's reactions to the assignment and the problems encountered in writing. Before reading a draft, a tutor can simply ask, "What problems did you have? Tell me how the writing went for you." This is a profitable step that is often absent when the tutor simply takes over at the beginning of a conference. When encouraged, even beginning writers can be precise about their successes and failures in a paper. And there is a noticeable psychological benefit when the student, not the tutor, first calls attention to faults in a draft.

The next stage of exploration usually means a reading of the draft. I believe it's helpful to hold the draft in both hands and read it aloud without stopping, making it sound as effective as possible without altering what the student has written or hiding any difficulty in following the sentences. After reading, I hand the draft back to the student and make an encouraging comment. No verbal instructions have been given or notations written. This uninterrupted reading promotes a holistic judgment of how the different parts of writing work together. It is difficult to get at the fundamental problems, those below the surface of the writing, when pausing to comment on its separate parts. An effective gestalt of the paper comes more dependably through an uninterrupted reading. The few problems which remain in the mind afterwards are ordinarily the most important ones to address at that point in the essay's development. This happens naturally when we approach writing in stages, moving logically from thesis and organization, to paragraph skills (development, unity, coherence), to sentence style, and finally to mechanics only when each prior stage has been completed successfully.

The next stage of consolidation flows from the exploratory stage and is usually a part of it. The student and tutor conclude what specifically needs to be done in the writing and talk about how to solve those problems. The tutor gives instruction, provides examples or suggests materials, whatever guidance the student requires.

It is also important in this stage to make clear the process of the conference and in what ways the student should participate in it. The student must know his or her exact role: to share in talk and questions that will lead to discovery of problems in the writing and possible solutions. This psychological preparation is important. Unlike in the classroom, students in a conference may not be sure of their role, whether they should be passive as in a medical examination, or active as in an open conversation. Spending adequate time in clarifying their role helps students resolve this ambiguity and also allows the tutor to establish a necessary condition for a helping relationship—honesty and openness.

The purpose of the last stage, planning and termination, is to provide a sense of closure. The accomplishments of the conference are summarized in light of the goals that were set out. A helpful procedure is to ask the student to summarize what he or she has learned and now intends to do. If the other stages have unfolded satisfactorily, the student should be able to verbalize what changes will be made in the writing. Planning also includes setting deadlines and anticipating the next conference. By summarizing accomplishments and looking forward to the next stage of writing, a tutor can let the student leave the conference with a sense of having moved forward, of having taken definite steps toward a final outcome.

The rhythms and roles of the classroom are a cinch for our students and tutors. They've been practicing for almost sixteen years. But lacking that same familiarity with the one-to-one conference, both tutors and students often need a new framework that will ease them into the intimacy and openness required for a successful collaborative effort. Training tutors to follow the steps used by counselors is one way to help them internalize the new rhythms and roles of a writing conference.

David Taylor
Moravian College
Bethlehem, PA

Call for Manuscripts
for
The Writing Lab Newsletter

As usual, the newsletter invites manuscripts on topics of interest to readers who teach writing in the one-to-one setting of writing labs and learning centers. Possible topics include the following:

-Descriptions of specific labs and centers (services offered, methods for selecting tutors, types of students served, relationship with academic departments, etc.)

-Reviews of materials that you use or think would be useful (At the moment, we have a new self-instruction book on grammar that should be reviewed by someone who might use such a book in his or her lab.)

-Funding sources

-Tutor training procedures

-Tutorial methods

-High school labs

-Computers in the lab

-Tutor's Column (essays by and for peer tutors)

Suggested lengths for manuscripts are five to ten typed (double spaced) pages for articles and two to three pages (typed, double spaced) for shorter articles such as reviews and Tutor's Column essays. However, shorter and longer pieces are also welcome. (Content is always more important than page length.) Please include a self-addressed envelope with your manuscript and clip (don't glue) sufficient postage for return.Deadlines for announcements are the first day of the previous month (e.g.,March 1 for the April issue, April 1 for the May issue, etc.)

Please send all manuscripts to Muriel Harris, *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

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

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