

# The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in  
one-to-one teaching of writing

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## ...from the editor...

Hello again to everyone. As we gear up for the new academic year, there's a sense of anticipation about meeting new challenges, starting new programs, working with new students. As food for thought for all that lies ahead, I offer this issue of the newsletter in the hope that it will be nourishing. The focus of the issue, like all issues of the newsletter, is the variety of concerns we must be aware of. But the overriding metaphor is nutrition. When several articles submitted for the newsletter used food metaphors worth chewing on, I gathered them together for your enjoyment.

Perhaps these food metaphors will also encourage a switch from the endless examination of the lab/clinic/center metaphors to considerations about whether labs are supermarkets which offer abundant varieties of nourishment, gourmet shoppes which tend to individual needs, or neighborhood grocery stores—there when you need them. Or is there yet another set of metaphors we can play with?

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## Lefse, popovers, and hot cross buns: Observations about three tutors

Those of us who are experienced in selecting tutors based upon a particular recipe may feel very comfortable working in our own kitchens. We may reach instinctively for particular ingredients, sometimes without even thinking where they are kept. Although most of us like to use specific measuring tools to make sure that our recipe produces effective results every time, some of us prefer to use a handful of this, a dash of that until the consistency of the dough "feels right." But what happens if the temperature in the kitchen changes, and we're so busy we don't even notice? Or it begins to rain? And what do we do when we find out that we're having surprise guests for dinner whose tastes we don't even know? Finally, what do we do if we have to prepare our recipe in an unfamiliar kitchen?

Writing centers are, in peculiar ways, very much like kitchens. They're homey places, frequently bustling with activity

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which may distract those of us who are cooking from paying as careful attention as we should to our own recipes. In addition, because writing centers, like kitchens, tend to become more complicated as the experience of the cook grows and the tastes of the clientele mature, subtle changes in temperature may require adjustments in our recipes if we want them to continue to please the palate. Finally, we need to know our own tastes as well as those of our clients. When I consider potential tutors, I prefer those which can become popovers and hot cross buns: their ingredients and texture are appealing to a variety of palates, and they rise nicely as you bake them in the oven. Very few people like lefse: no matter how much you knead the dough or how long you bake it, it remains flat because there's no yeast in the dough.

The particular lefse I have in mind was an unsuccessful tutor I selected when the kitchen was too busy, yet he was one who would have been chosen given most selection procedures. The popover was a successful tutor who would have been chosen given popular screening recipes. The hot cross bun was a successful tutor who would not have been chosen by most cooks. Let us explore why such different tutors emerged from similar recipes and consider the assumptions that we make when screening tutor applicants.

### The Popover

Let's begin with the popover, the successful tutor who would have been selected by most writing center directors. I encountered my popover when I had just changed kitchens. I had moved from one school to another, and my popover was one of seven brand new tutors who had been selected by my predecessor at St. Cloud. All seven had earned B's or better in writing courses, had come highly recommended by English teachers, and had been interviewed by the center director. She and I had discussed the selection process, and I felt sure we as cooks were looking for the same ingredients and following the same recipe. Yet when I read the tutors' application letters, I quickly realized that our recipes were somewhat different: of the seven tutors selected, I would have "hired" only five based upon their letters. My popover would have been one of the five. Her letter spoke of her work experience, much of it volunteer, "helping" work with a wide range of people—adolescent girls, community members, students. This work included aerobics and swimming, arts and crafts, and drama. It was clear that my "popover" was a self-starter capable of adjusting to

a variety of tutoring contexts. I also like the way she balanced, in her letter, her desire to learn with the desire to help. Although many applicants attempt to achieve such balance, few have the self-knowledge and rhetorical savvy to do so. My popover explained exactly how she wanted to improve her own written and oral communication abilities without ever implying that her needs would come first (as two applicants I would not have selected did). My "popover" seemed very realistic, about herself and others, and highly motivated to learn and to help others to learn.

The first time I met her, in a practicum class with the other new tutors, my assumptions were confirmed. My popover was bubbly, she interacted very effectively in our small group, she could "think on her feet," and her questions and comments indicated that she had the gumption to find out not only what she needed to survive as a tutor, but what she needed to learn to become a better writer. I was sure she'd grow into a highly successful tutor. Nevertheless, shortly after meeting my popover, I was disconcerted to discover that the former director did not consider my popover potentially "competent" because of occasional wordy sentences in her application. I was even more surprised that the former director considered another new tutor her "best hire," a tutor who seemed very self-enclosed during class discussion and downright uncomfortable during "problem solving" activities. I began to rethink my

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

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**Manuscripts:** Recommended length for articles is eight to twelve double-spaced typed pages, three to four pages for reviews, and one to two pages for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter manuscripts are invited. Please enclose self-addressed envelopes with return postage clipped (not pasted) to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is one month prior to the month of issue (e.g., Sept. 1 for the Oct. issue).

Please send all articles, reviews, announcements, comments, queries, and yearly donations to the editor.

own assumptions about the ingredients needed for a good tutor, and I began to wonder how two writing center directors could have such different tastes since she seemed to prefer lefse to popovers, and I clearly preferred popovers. I also began to wonder what the former director had talked with tutor applicants about during the interview since I use it, among other things, as a measure of oral communications skills, flexibility, and "on the spot" problem solving ability.

I discovered later that most of the applicants remembered nothing about the interview, except that it was a nice, short, informal chat; the former director told me she used the interview only to determine whether the applicants had pleasing personalities, whatever that means. Had the former director used a more structured, intensive interview to look carefully at the ingredients of my popover, she might have discovered some pleasant surprises—the richness of the fruit, and the sizable amount of self-activating yeast which no training can add once the recipe's already in the oven.

My popover turned out to be a delicacy. She was able to tailor her instruction very effectively to a wide variety of students, ranging from upperclassmen taking management finance classes to ESL students taking their first course in composition. One example will, perhaps, demonstrate her unusual ability as a tutor. Within a quarter, she coached a football player who had been in special education courses all of his life through the Writing Skills Assessment Test required by the College of Education. The student surprised himself as fear of writing gave way to enjoyment. Yet my popover did more than tutor effectively: she helped to train less experienced tutors, contributed substantially to the development and production of the writing center's cross-curricular newsletter during the first year of its publication, and designed a brochure to publicize center services. Although I baked my popover during on-going training sessions, I certainly had nothing to do with her essential ingredients. She came, as do other tutors, pre-mixed.

### The Lefse

The second tutor was an abysmal failure yet would have been selected given the screening processes most centers use. His application materials were beautifully written, he had earned A's in all of his writing and literature courses (most of them from rigorous teachers), and he spoke

articulately about the writing process. In addition, his application materials documented his empathy: he was a founding member of a student organization concerned with promoting "non-violence" and had worked for two years in a group home for the mentally retarded. On paper, all the ingredients seemed to be there. Yet had I measured the ingredients as carefully as I usually do, I would have discovered lefse, unleavened bread incapable of rising. My lefse proved himself unsuitable for tutoring despite a thorough-going training process.

I selected my lefse, unaware of the missing yeast, because the center was, on that first day of fall quarter when I met him, bustling with activity which distracted me, the cook, from paying as careful attention as I should have to my own recipe. I'd just lost 10 hours of graduate student help per week, when in walked this sweet, very sincere student who had a B.A. in English, was returning for teacher certification, and was eligible for 12 hours of work study. He seemed to be manna.

Yet lefse's references alone should have given me pause. Two teachers, from whom the student had taken four courses, spoke lovingly of his writing. Yet they were not faculty members who use peer evaluation or interact heavily with students, so I didn't expect them to be able to speak about his personality. Perhaps the fact that this student chose to repeat courses with these teachers should have indicated to me that he shies away from interaction. I'm not sure. What I do know is that the third faculty member, who generally remembers students quite well, couldn't remember this perspective tutor at all.

During lefse's interview, we were interrupted several times, and, in retrospect, I realize that these interruptions made my lefse uncomfortable. I do know that I shortened the interview quite a bit, leaving out some of the problem solving scenarios I usually use. In addition, although I always ask pointed questions about paid and volunteer work experience, I didn't ask him much about his job working with the mentally retarded. Since my husband works in a sheltered care workshop and my lefse's initial answers led into personal biases I probably have, I didn't probe further. I didn't quite feel comfortable about hiring my lefse, but I wasn't quite sure why. I stifled my instincts and hired a tutor I never was able to train.

Had I kept to my recipe, I would have

looked at lefse's ingredients more carefully and might have been able to surface the reasons for my uneasiness. It might have occurred to me that someone who is bothered by interruptions during an interview, when he is on his "best behavior," might not be able to deal with interruptions from the student or other tutors, might not be able to shut out distractions and concentrate in a noisy center environment. It didn't occur to me that someone who has worked one-to-one with mentally disabled people and has used that experience in an application letter to demonstrate his ability to tutor might, in fact, have felt uncomfortable in that environment and not had the self-awareness that he was setting himself up for yet another failure. In retrospect, I wish that I had used the full structured interview with my lefse.

I also wish I had asked my lefse to take the Meyers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator since he failed as a tutor because of personality type. The Meyers-Briggs test categorizes according to four dimensions representing opposing psychological processes: 1) Extraversion/Introversion, ways of focusing energy; 2) Sensing/Intuition, ways of perceiving; 3) Thinking/Feeling, ways of making evaluations and decisions; and 4) Judging/Perceiving, ways of approaching tasks in the outer world (Muriel Harris, *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, NCTE, 1986, 82). Each of these indicators suggests the way a person will act in specific situations; and although none of the dimensions are bad, we have discovered that tutors with balanced scores respond more effectively to a wide range of student learners.

Given lefse's reactions during tutoring sessions, I suspect his scores on the Meyers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator would have been extreme. First, he would have scored as an Introvert because of his need for absolute quiet when he worked and his absolute dislike of interruptions—even from students with whom he was working. He was incredibly shy—with students scheduled for regular appointments as well as with new students. And as I observed him work, he was frequently far too introspective; sometimes, he would even physically turn in upon himself. Students unfortunately evaluated him as cold and unresponsive. Part of this coldness is probably because he is a Thinker rather than a Feeler. He frequently used language which was too abstract or explanations which were too quick, and he didn't seem to notice that he'd lost his audience of one.

More seriously, my lefse seemed an Intui-

tor rather than a Sensor. He had extreme difficulty explaining things in a concrete way—to students, to me, or to teachers; this, and his impatience with details, made students feel as if he didn't know what he was talking about or that he was unwilling to help them. Finally, as a Perceiver (rather than a Judger), my lefse had trouble staying on-task in a tutoring situation.

Meyers-Briggs was able to help me understand why my lefse was unable to learn to tutor—in spite of my careful training and his obvious attempts to do well. I plan to use this measure in the future to help me objectify my screening process; it beats the handful of this and pinch of that measurement I've resorted to when things in application letters, recommendations, or interviews didn't feel quite right.

### The Hot Cross Bun

My final case, my hot cross bun, is an extremely successful tutor who would not have been selected by many writing center directors because of two "missing ingredients": he is not an English major but has a double major in anthropology and history with a minor in French; more significantly, he has had few writing courses and was kicked out of the research writing course the first time he took it because of his "arrogance" and his unending questions. Why in the world did I select such a tutor? Did the cook forget about such things as ingredients and measurement? Not so.

My hot cross bun didn't approach me in the usual way. He stopped me in the hall to find out if I would consider hiring a history/anthropology major as a writing tutor. Our casual meeting turned into a full-fledged interview, which covered all of my typical questions and problem solving scenarios; but in the case of hot cross bun, he initiated as much discussion as I did—and as many scenarios. He was interested in tutoring because he'd worked in a cultural exchange program with Japanese students and missed the kind of interchange tutoring provides. Even though he is not an English major, he saw writing as an integral part of his study and enjoyed the puzzling through language to discover meaning and then to communicate that meaning.

His concerns were two: Hot cross said that his writing was sometimes too dense and jargony when he was having trouble articulating a difficult concept, but I know that his understanding of his

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## Homemade pasta, writing centers and the evolution of approach: A call for research

Several years ago, after an excellent dinner at a small restaurant on the Oregon coast, I decided to learn to make my own pasta. As far as I know, I didn't have a hint of Italian ancestry, no background in fettucini, but that was not important: I was interested, primarily, in making my dinner taste better, in the quality of things.

Pasta making, at first, was hit and miss experimentation, fifty percent ingredients and fifty percent good intentions. Somedays the pasta would be delightful, full of flavor and body. Other days, it had the flavor and consistency of slightly dampened sawdust. Still others, it would glob together in an imitation of playdough.

Finally, I met someone else who made pasta, someone more experienced than I, someone who seemed assured of good results. I discovered from him that it isn't the ingredients which make good spaghetti, not the good intentions; it is the touch, light and articulate, blending without bruising, combining without forcing. It wasn't long before my pasta, too, had a consistent texture and taste, my own signature of success.

About the same time I was learning to make pasta, I was working in my first writing center, and the parallels are unavoidable. In both cases, I started as an experimenter, someone with the right ingredients—flour, water, a master's degree—and with an abundance of pure ideals. My tutoring, like my pasta, was prone to inconsistency, sometimes delightful, sometimes flying sawdust, sometimes a lump of unresilient dough.

Finally, through conferences and colleagues and collections of articles and continued effort, I developed the touch. My tutoring, like my pasta, took on new flavor and texture. And, while we all have our off days in the kitchen and in the writing center, I finally reached the point where I could expect good results, flavorful noodles, energized writers.

It's natural, I believe, for my approaches to new problems to evolve like that. Whenever I encounter something new—pasta, writing centers—I work my way through a somewhat predictable series of approaches to the problem at hand. First, I am an experimenter. Then I become a

practitioner. This, I think, is a natural enough progression.

A lot of people stop at this point, successful cooks, competent tutors. But, while the food is tasty and the dinner guests leave completely fulfilled, there is more to life than being a practitioner. My pasta is good; why should I try to make it better? Why should I care if anyone else can cook? Why should I document the changes in the quality

*The quality of my pasta is directly attributable to the results of my research. The futures of our writing centers are dependent on similar studies.*

of my pasta? The next step in the evolution requires a change of perspectives from inward directed techniques to outward directed approaches.

So, I took the next step in the evolution of approach. I became a theorist, an author, an advocate. I copied down my recipe; I wrote papers for conferences and publications; I offered tutor training courses; I convinced my friends to buy pasta makers.

A few weekends ago I made dinner for a few friends. On such occasions I generally mix my dough ahead of time, but don't roll my noodles until the guests arrive. A friend looked at the dough, dirt brown and dull, appearing much like a softball rolled through a mud hole, and said, "Are we going to eat that?" I assured her that we were, that it would be fine, that it would look more appetizing after I rolled it out. "But," she asked, "how do you know? How can you be so sure?"

Research, I said. After years of active experimentation, I have now learned that the right ingredients, combined in certain ways, mixed to a specific consistency, rolled and allowed to dry for thirty minutes, will cook to a perfect al dente in

four minutes. I can prove it. I have established the results over years of reduplication. With an N now well into the hundreds, I have shown a nearly one hundred percent success rate.

The next week, at school, while serving as Writing Center Ambassador to the Department of Psychology, I presented my writing center soft sell. One of the professors looked at me with the same are-we-going-to-eat-that expression my friend had used on the pasta dough, and said, "But how do you know this writing center stuff works? How can you be so sure?"

Producing good writers may not be as easy as producing good pasta. In the kitchen I know exactly what to expect from too much flour, too much kneading, too little ripening. If the noodles stick together, I know exactly where I erred. If the dough crumbles through the roller, I know my mistakes.

As I evolved from experimenter to practitioner to theorist to researcher, my pasta profited from every change. Now I can make the stuff, I can make it nearly every time, and I can assure my dinner guests that the results will be palatable.

In the writing center, however, results are not so easy to categorize, unfortunately. Many writing center people have evolved only from experimenters to practitioners or perhaps on to being theorists, and there they sit, products of a halted evolution. As a result we can offer no real assurance to our dinner guests. We have little research to back up our claims. I cannot answer the questions of the psychology department. I cannot be sure.

Once I decided my writing center needed research, I began wondering exactly what needed to be researched. "What do I want to know?" I said. The answers, I think, are in the spaghetti.

With pasta, I first wanted to know how to make it taste good, and I think that is probably the first thing a writing centerian needs to know, too. Do people like it? Do they push away from the table with a good taste in their mouths? Does it leave them satisfied? Too much salt, too much sour, too much sweet can kill any recipe. So, first, I want to know if the people who have tasted my concoction found it palatable. Do my guests enjoy dinner? Do the writers find tasty the servings of the writing center? This I learn by listening to

those who have sat down at my table.

Second, I want to know about the consistency of the stuff. What does it feel like? How does it hold together? If I add or subtract a little of some key ingredient, will the substance improve? Or will everything sawdust apart or glob together? To discover this with spaghetti, I have to put down my fork, stick my hand in, and squish everything between my fingers; I'm expecting I'll have to experience a similar thing in the writing center, dirtying my hands, analyzing my ingredients. To learn about consistency, I'll have to examine the texture of the dough, the contents of tutoring conferences.

Third, I want to know the value of my efforts. Does the work I do hold some intrinsic value? Will people take seconds, come again to my dinner? How does the cost of my pasta compare with the cost of store-bought? Is this something I should do for everyday, or something I should reserve for special occasions? Can I afford to use semolina and virgin olive oil? Can I afford not to? Is the whole enterprise worth anything? These questions, too, pertain both to pasta and to writing centers, and they require me to justify the value of my results.

If my writing center is to be as successful as my dinner parties, I need more research to explain and categorize my results. If the student writers are to leave as satisfied and fulfilled as my guests, I need more research to help legitimize my recipe. I need to know the effects of too much kneading and of too little ripening. I know how to correct the problems of limp noodles and crumbling dough; I'm not so sure with writers.

Eventually, the analogy breaks down. It will always be easier to identify and manipulate the ingredients of spaghetti than the ingredients of writing. But we have to take the next step in assuring the quality of our offerings, in making the dinner ready for guests. The quality of my pasta is directly attributable to the results of my research. The futures of our writing centers are dependent on similar studies.

Kevin Davis  
East Central University  
Ada, Oklahoma

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## Extending the writing center

Recognizing a writing center as a positive intervention program for a high school English curriculum is easy. However, when a board of education is asked for financial support in establishing a writing center in an individual school, suddenly relevancy must be proven. It is not enough to say it will benefit students in their writing of English class themes. Now we are expected to prove how a writing center will benefit the entire school. Perhaps you can borrow from the following rationale ways in which the writing center can be extended beyond being a mere instructional ally for the English department.

Some of the areas in which we are most often asked to tutor students in our writing lab include journal and diary writing; dialogue writing; book reports; analyzing and evaluating literature; poetry writing; editorial writing; research paper writing; sentence/paragraph structure; term papers; proposition papers; and letter writing. Of course, these types of assignments are not limited to the English classroom. As English teachers we encourage writing across the curriculum.

### Writing Across the Curriculum

Perhaps talking to faculty in other departments would allow you to casually suggest other forms of writing which would be a "natural" in their content areas. For example, biographies, historical novels, Voice of Democracy contests, petitions, letters to political leaders, and resolutions and amendments would be ideal suggestions for history class writing assignments. Science and health teachers might consider having students write health advice columns, science fair reports, research papers utilizing scientific notation; and even grant proposals for scientific research. Foreign language classes may want to try some creative writing for translation, or even letter writing to pen pals in other countries. Even physical education teachers could utilize the writing center with assignments for writing rules and directions for various sports; sports reports; and accident reports which would have to be filed should injury occur during various sports. Vocational teachers would be pleased to have well written applications, resumes, and business forms. They could also have students seek help when composing various business letters and

bids on jobs or writing case studies.

In order to give a speech, one must write a speech. The writing center is a natural place for both the writing of a speech and the practicing of the speech. Speeches can be for speech classes, assemblies, candidate's election assemblies, student council, contest speeches, baccalaureate speakers, graduation speakers, public service announcements, school radio announcers, or PTA presentations.

Writing centers can also cater to extra-curricular activities such as school literary magazines, school newspapers, and P.A. announcers.

### Writing Center/Resource Center

Keep in mind that the writing center is also an excellent resource center, not only for English teachers, but for any teacher who needs help with writing ideas or assignments for students, or for herself! Who says only students can be clients? Store such items as texts on composition, periodicals on composition, articles on composition, posters, handouts, supplemental materials, curriculum and textbook guides, and supplemental book lists in the writing center.

Having a central location for writing contests and scholarship applications is a good idea, and what better place would there be than the writing center? With the current trend of word processing, why not house several computers in the writing center with word processing programs as well as remediation programs for writing. The computers could then be used by both students and teachers for composition, and what a delight it will be to have typed papers from our students!

When a very detailed research project is assigned, having the resource materials pulled and kept in the writing center would allow students to come to one place where they can find the materials they need and a quiet place to work, as well as willing tutors to help with the writing process.

The writing center staff can also make classroom presentations on such things as analyzing literature, poetry writing, filling out business forms, using MLA guidelines, or whatever

they feel comfortable teaching and sharing.

The writing center can also be opened to the community as a public relations measure. Members of the PTA or parents who need to make presentations may also find the writing center a helpful resource.

Yes, we are ALL teachers of writing, and writing centers will benefit all of us, no matter what course we teach.

Barb Baltrinic  
Ellet High School  
Akron, Ohio

### Call for proposals

#### New York College Learning Skills Association

12th Annual Symposium on  
Developmental/Remedial Education  
April 9-11, 1989  
Albany, New York

Proposal deadline: Oct. 28, 1988. Contact David Martin, Director, Learning Skills Center, Cayuga Community College, Auburn, New York 13021 (315-255-1743, ext. 304).

### Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association

Annual Conference  
Las Cruces, New Mexico  
October 21-22, 1988

The RMWCA will meet at the Las Cruces Hilton in conjunction with the Rocky Mountain MLA and Writing Program Administrators. The conference will include five sessions and a luncheon program on writing centers, with an emphasis on interaction and informal discussion. The joint conference also will offer sessions on composition, technical writing, and literature.

For registration materials, write to Richard Leahy, Department of English, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho 83725; or call the BSU Writing Center at (208) 385-1298.

### Midwest Writing Centers Association

Annual Conference  
October 28-29  
Kansas City, Mo.

Muriel Harris will give the major presentation. Conference costs, which include Friday lunch, are \$34 for members, \$45 for non-members, and \$15 for students. Registration should be mailed to David Anderson, Thomas Hall - Writing Center, Kearney State College, Kearney, NE, 68849.

### Pennsylvania Association of Tutorial Services

Conference on tutoring in higher education

"New Concerns for the 90's"  
Oct 13-15, 1988  
Pocono Manor Resort  
Poconos, Pa

Registration deadline: Sept. 15, 1988. For further information, contact Louise Holmes Johnson, CC240, Northampton Community College, 3835 Green Pond Road, Bethlehem, PA 18017.

### Need help in planning better presentations?

Robert Hamm, NCTE's Director of Affiliate and Member Services, regularly sends information that may be useful to readers of NCTE affiliate publications. Recently, he sent out reprints of an article in the Spring 1988 issue of the *Journal of the Oregon Educational Media Association* on "Planning for Better Presentations," by Peggy Agostino Sharp. If you are preparing or planning a presentation that includes lecture segments, some group work, some media, etc., you may find this article to be a useful brief guide. Reprints can be obtained from the editor: Gail VanGorder, 6714 S.W. Corbett, Portland, Oregon 97219.



# Tutors' Column

## A delighted tutor

Traffic wasn't as heavy along 66th street when I walked to the St. Petersburg Junior College fifteen years ago. The stretch of road is still pretty much the same though—lots of hot sun, sand-spurs, and car fumes. But I was young and happy going to meet my guy and to spend the day attending classes at SPJC.

We would meet between classes, grab a Coke or coffee from a vending machine, sit on a green bench in the quadrangle, and talk about a lot of heavy stuff, chain-smoking of course. We were learning about philosophy, logic, literature, and art, and for the first time, we were liking it—school, that is.

Outside of JC our lives were limited. Working filled most of the hours. There was always Beaux Arts and Nature Trail for hanging out, and Williams Park for anti-war demonstrations—lots of waiting for busses and hitching rides. Once we met Joan Baez's ex-husband, David Harris, downtown. He seemed tired and bored. I guess the whole anti-war thing was winding down by that time.

It's not surprising that the Junior College was the place where we most wanted to be.

And now after many years, a few more degrees, a couple of kids, and a move to North Carolina, we're back. My guy teaches English, and I help out in the Writing Lab a few hours a week.

The Writing Lab is located on the second floor of the Language Arts building. It's a large room with several tables, chairs, and microcomputers. Not only can students use the lab staff to hone up on their writing skills, but they can also learn word processing.

Many of the students who come by are people who finally have the chance to go to college after being out of school for as long as twenty years or more. Each one is eager to learn how to write. Many are shy, more are afraid—afraid that they won't be able to articulate a single moment of their lifetimes of experience. When I help them to do

just that, their gratitude is boundless.

Although I have taught and tutored elsewhere, my work was never as rewarding as it is at SPJC. As a teaching assistant at the University of South Florida, I found that many of my students were unhappy at being required to take Freshman English. And then later when I was tutoring athletes at North Carolina State University, many of them weren't interested in writing; they wanted to play ball. So one can imagine how surprised I was at the graciousness of the Junior College students.

Many of them may have worked all day before coming to school or will be going to work after leaving the Lab at ten o'clock at night. Many are tired, many have children at home, many rely on the bus. Some may even have walked to JC along 66th Street. Some are sad, some are lonely. Many will stop coming. But they all share the desire to learn and some will succeed.

In such a visually-oriented society, it's not surprising that so many people have great difficulty with the written word. But I do find it surprising that so many wish to learn how to write. There was a time when I despaired at the seeming worthlessness of my ability to write and to teach writing. I felt obsolete. I wished that I had learned a useful trade.

Now that my life has brought me back to SPJC, I feel that I have something to offer and find myself continually amazed at how graciously my knowledge is being accepted. I was given a chance at SPJC, and now I am helping others to have that same chance. My life began here, and after a long absence, I have happily returned. And when I see a young girl and her guy squeezed in together at a single microcomputer helping each other out in the Writing Lab, the fifteen years between then and now vanishes. I even get the urge to have a smoke.

Rita Daly Hooks  
Writing Lab Tutor  
St. Petersburg Junior College  
St. Petersburg, Florida

## Slow cooking and fast food: Balancing tutoring options in the writing center

It's not too hard to become a gourmet. I started in college: First coffee, then wine, then homemade pasta and fresh baked whole grain bread, then French, Indian, Chinese cookbooks and a lot of brightly colored herbs and powders in meticulously identical bottles. Although I still import my favorite coffee beans from the North Beach area of San Francisco, I'll be stopping on the way home from work today (it's Thursday) at a not-to-be-named fast food franchise for burgers. Like every one I know, I grow older, more responsible, busier. Day by day, I run out of time. But I still need to eat.

In a surprisingly similar way, I moved from an initial Writing Center gourmet's snobbishness to what I hope is a more worldly and tolerant attitude toward organizing tutoring options. My early advocacy of long-term tutoring (tutors seeing the same student regularly, say once a week) over the course of a semester, what I'll call slow cooking, has been balanced with a clearer understanding of the benefits of short and/or non-consecutive tutoring sessions (tutors seeing a student perhaps only once or for shorter and/or sporadic sessions), what I'll call fast food. Both tutoring options have their strong points.

Slow cooking in the writing center supports long term development of the tutees' writing processes. Writing growth is slow and complicated, sometimes to the point of seeming magical, and a tutee and tutor working in conjunction over weeks or months are often surprised at the end of the semester by how much they've accomplished. Leafing through tutor end-of-session comments in the tutoring folder of a regular student, I can trace such important and probably long-term development fairly clearly. From:

"John had a paper on whales that was an opinion. We talked and he decided to get a better handle on this big topic and re turn."

to:

"He had a good draft— needed a *small* amount of help getting his logical jumps supported!"

to:

"Read it [paper], pointed out a few confusing points and he went on his way. He has really improved."

to:

"John just wanted to bounce an idea off the tutors for reassurance."

Slow cooking lets us know our tutees. It provides useful and reassuring feedback. John's work moved from uncertainty and chaos to some measure of control. By the fourth session, he uses tutors and "bounces an idea" off of them. John is clearly seeing himself as the author of his writing. We all like this slow cooking because it illuminates how tutoring works. Writers improve over time just as a simmering soup pleases fragrantly all afternoon and comes out at the end of the day as a rich broth greater than the sum of its parts.

On weekends, I'm all for slow cooking: soups, turkeys, baked potatoes keep the long winter at bay. And some tutees thrive on just such time and attention. You know who they are. Their center folders are fat. Their faces are familiar. They form part of the writing center community, and they bring along their friends.

There is a variant type of slow cooking tutee. This tutee is devoted but fickle, an All-You-Can-Eat regular. Every time she arrives, this tutee chooses to work with a different tutor, for she finds that the smorgasbord-like variety of tutoring approaches gives her the support and encouragement she needs. She explains things succinctly in an interview:

"When I want someone to show me how it's good, I go to Trecie. When I want someone to tear it apart, I go to Ken."

We may not agree with her brutally matter-of-fact analysis of tutoring styles, but we can see the sense of her choices: tutees come for *something*. Often they know what they want to eat.

And some writers like fast food.

I no longer blanch when a writer skids to a stop at the center door and says "I need a tutor quick," phrasing in which I formerly heard echoes of "Gimme a Big Mac and fries." Instead, like a successful franchise supervisor, I now realize that a writing customer well served is a writing customer who may return and who may tell others of our fine services.

Additionally, I'm no longer sure that a quick and efficient tutoring session is inferior to a long-term tutoring commitment.

Here are the first four single-session folders from our files (student writers who appear not to have returned):

Arnie's folder: "Arnie has a nice writing style. He needed a little help with transitions, sentence and paragraph."

Allison's folder: "I worked with Allison on how to compare two different essays."

Adena's folder: "She came up with the great idea of using her uncles as characters in her 'a good mechanic is hard to find' paper."

Clint's folder: "Suggested ways to be more specific—he was too distant from his writing (he admitted he had created a fictional scenario)."

I view these fast food sessions positively. From the comments, writers appeared to get a certain amount of help and support from tutors. Should these writers need further help, they know where to come. Momentarily, for whatever reasons, when these writers were hungry, we were here.

I'm reminded of the typical *New Yorker*-type cartoon of a worn out, ragged individual pulling himself across a cow-skull strewn desert dreaming of impossible succor and bumping into *Mom's Diner*, complete with Mom and a well stocked fast food grill. For these one time Center participants, we were the oasis in the desert or the needed fast food fix. I like to think that these non-returning students have taken advantage of other equally valuable writing supports: campus peers, teachers' office hours, family members, and so on. At the Writing Center, we sometimes forget we're not the only useful source of sustenance.

I still train new tutors to try to encourage future appointments at the end of each session. I still go to professors and encourage them to direct students who need writing support to come work with us regularly. But I'm also interested in making each session, short or long, successful for tutee and tutor. Tutors need to know how to calm a nervous tutee who thinks he wants a "five minute" session in order to encourage him to return. Tutors need to know how to optimize what

little time they have, making the occasional decision to be directive rather than reflective if the paper is due almost immediately or if quick, immediate feedback is likely to encourage a student writer to return at a less stressful future time.

Perhaps the concept of leftovers will help here. Leftovers are nothing more than home-made fast food, at least in my house. The carefully constructed pasta is brutally heated up with a dash of liquid thrown in. But it works. And it tastes good when I'm tired.

Equally, the tutor who likes to work closely and long with serious tutees can find that occasional leftover, the pointed or small-scale remark, comes in handy when she's confronted with a fast food tutee. My advice is to use the left overs—a side dish of comma splice explanation or a deep-fried brainstorming session—and then go on to the next, more in-depth session.

Just as tutees have styles and preferences (fast foods, slow cooking or smorgasbord), so do tutors. Some tutors are good at short sessions, and some are good at group tutoring, and some are good at long term tutoring. The thriving, multi-functional writing center cannot afford to imitate the persona of an elitist gourmet on a shoestring budget, but it can provide honest food for grateful folks.

A few suggestions for developing balanced writing center tutoring options:

1. Post a list of tutors' specialties by subject area (ESL tutoring, freshman English tutoring, general tutoring, business writing, creative writing, etc.) so that tutees can make choices.
2. Know tutors' tutoring styles and try to help match them to tutoring situations they'll thrive on (for instance, match up teacher-referred ESL students with patient, slow cooking type tutors who also know or are willing to learn ESL techniques).
3. Let faculty know the tutoring options available to their students (appointment, drop-in, group tutoring, in-class tutoring, and so on).
4. Discuss slow cooking versus fast food techniques with tutors. How do you keep a tutoring relationship vital and produc-

tive after six or seven sessions? How do you tutor someone for 10 minutes? Can anything be done in that amount of time? If so, what?

Final advice: Share recipes, collaborate, eat hearty.

Wendy Bishop  
University of Alaska—  
Fairbanks

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*....from the editor*

(cont. from page 1)

notice the new format which in part accompanies the growing sense of professionalism among writing lab people. In part, it is also a response to your comments about the need for newsletter issues durable enough to pass around and easy to copy. If you have further suggestions, keep sending them in.

Muriel Harris, editor

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*Lefse, popovers, and hot cross buns*

(cont. from page 4)

own problems, and his already partially formulated strategies for correcting them, would help his credibility as a tutor. Hot cross was also concerned, as many inexperienced tutors are, about his knowledge of technical terms. He wondered if there were handouts he could occasionally use until he knew the English territory well enough to generate instruction on his own. I was overjoyed that he was gutsy enough to even think of handouts as a stop-gap measure and that he was so aware of his own writing. I checked his references, and they verified that he was intensely curious, asked thoughtful questions, was flexible, and was a problem-solver. I read his writing sample, and it was indeed dense and jargony at times. I hired him, and he's not only risen beautifully, but has also added a new flavor to the center.

Hot cross has proven himself an excellent tutor and has dealt with a variety of students, including non-linear learners and ESL students. Even though Meyers-Briggs tells me he is Rational, that personality type is less extreme in him than in lefse. He is particularly effective in using concrete language to explain difficult concepts.

And he is one of the few tutors I've seen who continuously uses visual modes of presentation: he uses body language and whatever physical objects are available to simplify language relationships for students; in addition, he rarely uses handouts but instead doodles pictures for students and uses their own language to show the relationships between the form, in pictures, and their words. Moreover, although he is cynical by nature and at times, Introverted, he is—unlike lefse—far more balanced. No matter how he feels, he is able to switch himself off when a tutorial begins and focus his attention on the student. Finally, when working with students, hot cross is highly adaptable and unassuming. For example, when working with a non-native speaker, he startled other tutors by switching back and forth from French to English without skipping a beat. When tutors later voiced their surprise, hot cross acted as if it was no big deal and said, "Whatever works..."

As these brief observations have indicated, we are not all in agreement about the ingredients needed for an effective tutor. And not all of us are as careful as we should be to measure the ingredients we think are there. We probably should—as individuals and writing center advocates—test more thoroughly our assumptions about what ingredients make up a good tutor. Moreover, we should continue to explore ways of measuring ingredients so we feel comfortable that the tutors who serve our clientele are not only palatable, but pleasing, to students and ourselves. Let's not overload ourselves with lefse.

Judith Kilborn  
St. Cloud State University  
St. Cloud, MN

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*The Journal of Educational Techniques and Technologies*, published by the International Association for Learning Laboratories, is devoted to publicizing the educational techniques and technologies used by teachers, media specialists, learning resources personnel, and technologists in their efforts to improve language teaching and learning. For further information contact Robin Lawrason, Media Learning Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

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## Successes and failures: Facilitating cooperation across the curriculum

In fall 1986, our writing lab served 282 students, some many times, with assignments for more than 18 different subjects. The students ranged from freshmen to graduate students with almost 40% representing some minority. Students who visit the writing lab receive individual tutoring; however, we also offer special cooperative efforts to different campus departments. Such efforts take the form of lecture demonstrations in various disciplines, a program for education students, occasional responses to individual teachers, and occasional instances of satisfying specific student needs unconnected to writing problems.

### Presenting Lecture Demonstrations

Attempting to build bridges with departments across campus, the English faculty member who started the University of Missouri—St. Louis writing lab offered to present lecture demonstrations in various assignments and offered to explain to students the particular instructor's writing assignment. To meet the instructor's needs, she met or talked on the phone with him or her, asked for any appropriate handouts, and suggested the instructor provide examples of former assignments the instructor considered particularly effective. Among the courses to which she regularly presented lecture demonstrations were a psychology graduate seminar, a business policy course, an introductory nursing course, an upper level sociology class, and an education graduate seminar. Most of the lecture demonstrations concerned documentation, format, research skills, and writing processes. Her success can be attributed to several factors: her personal contacts, her willingness to respond, and her effort to investigate the skills required by disciplines other than English.

However, since the faculty member has been on leave for several semesters now, the lecture demonstrations have been virtually abandoned. This may be the result of her doing such an outstanding job that now the faculty for whom she gave lecture demonstrations are able to provide the information themselves. The problem may also be that no one is willing to make the contacts necessary or to devote the time and

energy necessary to produce an effective lecture demonstration. In fact, I presented the only one given during the 1986-87 academic year. While I enjoyed discussing the literature review with psychology graduate students and was able to make their assignment relevant by using examples from my own dissertation, the time necessary to prepare and the lack of feedback from the instructor made my experience unsatisfying and reinforced my opinion that giving lecture demonstrations should be someone's fulltime commitment, not an occasional, voluntary service. We need to hire a faculty member to publicize the lecture demonstrations, to make the personal contacts with faculty, and to do the presentations in consultation with the faculty and other writing staff. Such a person could make this service the success it once was.

### Helping Education Students

A much newer interaction with faculty in other disciplines is the program I helped start two years ago with the School of Education. The national concern with teacher competency led the Associate Dean of Education to establish a committee to decide what needed to be done to insure that education graduates were competent

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communicators. As a member of that committee, I was able to prevent the committee simply instituting a standardized test as many of the uninformed committee members wanted to do. Such a test is easy to administer and evaluate, and in terms of time and effort, it is relatively cheap. However, writing is a production skill, and it should be evaluated through a production task, not one where the student simply reacts to someone else's product. The committee accepted this

theoretical perspective and then demanded a procedure for assuring that education students had basic communication skills.

The solution, after much discussion, was a plan of collecting writing samples in several required, beginning education courses. Course instructors evaluated the writing samples and recommended that students attend the Writing Lab to remediate any deficiencies. We use an existing form to record the recommendation for the instructor, student, advisor, and lab. At the semester's end, I sent a report to the instructors who recommended students, to the Associate Dean of Education, and to the advisor. Students were required to continue attending the lab until we certified that they had demonstrated an ability to correct the problems they were sent to the lab to remediate. The advisor agreed that students who did not demonstrate such an ability would not be allowed to student teach.

The successes in this program were the students who came for help on their own after completing the required remediation and the positive relationships we established with some faculty. The failures were the negative responses by most students to being forced to attend the lab.

*Our tutors spend a lot of time just talking to students, sometimes about writing projects, but sometimes about personal problems or decisions.*

To help alleviate this negative attitude, we have opened a new lab in the building where the School of Education is located. The dean, who supports our efforts, helped to locate a room we have staffed with experienced tutors who are generally education majors and, therefore, familiar with the assignments students are working to complete.

We have not, however, eliminated this cooperative program's greatest problem—the lack of faculty understanding about what makes “good writing.” For example, one faculty member sent students to the lab, not for composition help, but as a sort of punishment to make clear to the students the need for correct spelling. He did not allow them to use a dictionary on the in-class writing sample, but he deducted for incorrect

spelling. This same teacher suggested that the lab could help a student with handwriting. A more insidious problem was the tendency of some teachers to send minority students to the lab, regardless of their performance on the writing sample, based on the apparent misconception that all minorities have a dialect problem. The obvious solution to the lack of teacher information is in-service training in composition theory and practice. We are working on convincing the Dean to include such training during one of the regular faculty meetings.

### Responding to Individual Teachers' Needs

While we have tried to meet the needs of the School of Education, we have also responded to requests from instructors in other disciplines. They have asked for special lab services for their students. These efforts have been successful when the instructor has listened to the Writing Lab staff about ways to aid students. For example, an instructor in political science who had received help in the lab as an undergraduate student recently asked if she could send students to the lab after returning their papers as unacceptable. She agreed to adjust the grade upward if students received help in the lab but not to penalize them if they chose not to seek help. The lab verified that the students had come for help by signing a referral sheet that the student returned to the instructor. In addition, the instructor saw the necessity of asking for writing samples early in the semester while students still had time to improve rather than requiring only one writing assignment toward the semester's end. Her students came willingly for assistance on the assignment she returned and continued to ask the lab for help as the semester progressed.

In contrast, another political science instructor informed the students that all of them would have to give her a signed form from us indicating that we had helped them on their papers. She announced this before giving any assignments and included the statement that none of them could write. Many students were angry about her attitude and about being forced to come to the lab. This was especially true of those students who perceived themselves as “better” students, some of whom had already received only A's in writing classes in high school and college. Although we were able to defuse some of the hostility, few of those students ever returned to the Writing Lab. The key to success in working with instructors seems to be indirect in-service so

that they are informed professionals who create in students a positive attitude towards the writing lab and the help we offer.

### Helping with Non-writing Needs

In addition to the composition help the Writing Lab gives to students and instructors, we also serve them in non-writing situations. For example, we provide ad hoc advising, offer help with word processing, give hints for job searches, make counseling referrals, and supply information. Frequently, the lab personnel are called upon to advise students. Last fall is a good example. A student tutor discovered that the student who had been to the lab for help with a Shakespeare paper had not passed Basic Writing and should not have been in a junior level class. The tutor convinced the student to drop the course and offered to help the student explain the problem to the instructor. In other cases, we have discovered students asking for help before taking the appropriate writing class and have been able to encourage them to enroll in the writing class they need. We frequently encourage good writers who visit us to enroll in additional writing classes and pass out literature about the Writing Certificate.

Because our lab has two computers available to students and tutors to help them learn to compose on the computers, we also find ourselves becoming computer instructors. We introduce students to the mechanics of operating a computer and encourage them to use one as part of their college experience.

Although we do not have the computer capability to actuate a job search, we frequently help students with that process. For example, Jim wanted to change jobs, but he did not know where to go for help in deciding on a career. I directed him to the Counseling Center's Career Library which has access to SIGI, a computer program for choosing a career. Other students just want help with cover letters and resumes, but Jim wanted someone to talk to him about his options. Our tutors spend a lot of time just talking to students, sometimes about writing projects, but sometimes about personal problems or decisions.

Both the tutors and the professional staff have been called upon to help students with problems. Once, I walked a student to the Counseling Center because she was in tears over a problem with her abusive parents. Sometimes,

however, this approach backfires: John informed me that he did not need counseling help because he had worked at the local mental hospital and knew what his problems were. Occasionally, we act as the sounding board for students upset with their spouses, parents, bosses or teachers. In fact, we include role playing sessions in our training to help our tutors learn to deal with the hostility and fear that tutees sometimes feel free to vent on a hapless tutor.

But sometimes our only function in the Writing Lab is to serve as a source of information. We answer questions about facilities on campus,

*In that we serve the entire university, not just the English Department, we can count ourselves a success in facilitating cooperation across the curriculum.*

instructors' office hours, university policy, manners, and academic procedures. Perhaps, the friendly atmosphere leads students to drop in with questions, but we also get them on the phone. Somehow, the public believes that those who teach writing must have a general world knowledge.

The successes of our Writing Lab are mostly in the one-on-one help we give to students either in the lab or as part of a class. Our success with instructors has been in the personal contacts we have made and the hidden in-service we have achieved. The 8.1% increase in students served for 1986-87 reflects those successes. The failures have been more in procedures and personnel losses than in interactions with students. In that we serve the entire university, not just the English Department, we can count ourselves a success in facilitating cooperation across the curriculum.

Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald  
University of Missouri-St. Louis

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## Computer programs available for record-keeping

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If you want to speed up and uncomplicate the process of scheduling tutors' appointments and/or if tutors are spending too much time (and paper) on keeping entries on their students, computer help is available. Dave Edson, a computer science major and tutor at the University of Idaho, has written Tutor Mania and Tutor Schedule, two programs that may help. As Dave has noted, "Tutoring is fun. There is almost nothing in the world as satisfying as helping students learn to learn. However, the paperwork behind tutoring can be a bit repetitive." To relieve the problem, Dave now offers the following:

**Tutor Schedule.** This program can schedule up to five students per hour with the same tutor, for one-to-one appointments, small groups, drop-in hours, workshops, etc. and includes the tutor's available hours. The program can handle 120 tutors and 500 students and an expanded program can handle 2000 tutors and 6000 students. The program is intended for use at the reception desk so that when students walk in

and explain what they need (and when), the secretary can match them with the available tutors. When the student makes a choice, the appointment is automatically scheduled. Tutor Schedule can also generate numerous lists, including alphabetical lists of tutors, students, appointment reminder lists, weekly schedules for tutors, and so on. Price: \$300. Requires an IBM-PC or compatible with 640 K RAM and two disk drives or a hard disk.

**Tutor Mania.** This program is for tutors' journal entries when working with students. It also generates pay sheets and weekly scheduling lists and can do some basic accounting (total hours tutored, hours per tutor, etc.). Price: \$300. Requires IBM-PC or compatible with 256K RAM and at least one disk drive and a printer.

You can request custom modifications on these programs or arrange for contract work. Contact Dave Edson, Edson Software, 918 Blake, Moscow, Idaho 83843.

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### **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

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Address correction requested

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