

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 15, Number 3

November, 1990

....from the editor....

While I hope all the articles in this month's newsletter are useful, the lead article, Nancy Allen's "Developing an Effective Tutorial Style," can be doubly helpful. It includes two dialogues, one a "somewhat" satisfactory tutorial and the other a "highly" satisfactory one. I have found these dialogues to be the source of some extremely useful discussion in our peer tutor training course. I offer both dialogues without identifying which one was the highly satisfactory tutorial and let the peer tutors-to-be guess and offer reasons for their choices.

And a reminder that while the newsletter is rich with insightful writing, our operating budget is miniscule. All of your \$10 yearly contributions go toward printing and postage costs, and we barely cover those. Thus, we have no funds to bill business offices, no invoices (ask instead that they prepay), and no reminders that your subscription is expiring. So, check the date on your mailing label. We don't want to lose you!

-Muriel Harris, editor

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Developing an Effective Tutorial Style

Solving problems in tutorials is a complicated business. As tutors we are not presented with well-formed problems that submit to impersonal analysis and formulaic solutions. Instead, we must work to define problems, probe for misunderstanding, explore ideas, convey what we hope are helpful courses of action, and get some sense of the person we are working with as well through interactions with the students who come to us for help. For tutors, our style of interpersonal communication is central to every aspect of tutoring. How we say things can be just as important as what we say. As a result we are always looking for more effective ways to communicate the help we have to offer.

Recently, in an effort to improve my own understanding of how tutorials work and what makes them effective, I conducted observations of other tutors at work. I decided, however, to look at tutors in a domain outside writing. When we who are writing instructors and tutors look at tutorials in

our own field, we run the risk that preformed conceptions or well-known problems may skew our vision. Therefore, in order to get a clearer picture of effective tutorial strategies, I looked at tutorials from another domain, computer programming.

During tutorials in programming, as in writing, students are learning how to handle the intricacies of a language to achieve their goals. They face the challenges of syntax and style described in unfamiliar terminology. Because of these similarities between programming and writing, I believed a close look at what computer programming tutors did and how they did it would provide information that could be readily put to use in writing tutorials. The Computing Center became a place for me to learn about tutorial strategies; the territory was enough like that of writing to provide relevant information, but it was still enough of a foreign terrain to allow me to see the forest without being distracted by my favorite trees.

Tutorial Observations

The tutors observed for this study were eight undergraduate men who worked in the Computing Center's tutorial program. I observed and audio-taped eleven of their tutorials conducted at different programming stations around campus. To learn about the success of these tutorials, I asked the students that were helped to fill out a questionnaire at the end of each session on which they rated their satisfaction with the tutorial on a 5-point scale from "highly satisfied" to "not satisfied" and rated the tutor from "very, very knowledgeable" to "not knowledgeable" about their problem.

Communication Style

The students found the observed tutorials to be largely successful. Of the eleven students helped, eight rated their tutorials in the top two categories of "highly" or "mostly satisfied," and no student checked "not satisfied." Eight of the eleven respondents also rated their tutors in the top two categories of knowledgeability about the student problems, but there was no consistent correlation between the tutor's degree of knowledgeability and the student's satisfaction.

To find another explanation for student satisfaction, I compared the tutorial strategies

used in the "highly" satisfactory tutorials with those used in tutorials rated only "moderately" or "somewhat" satisfactory. What I found was a clear difference in interpersonal communication style.

In the tutorials rated as "moderately" or "somewhat" satisfactory, tutors provided the students with explanations of problems and the actions suggested. These explanations were correct and varied, involving drawings and examples as well as verbal descriptions, and they included generalized strategies that the student could apply to other situations. Such strategies are often praised and incorporated into one-to-one conferences (Freedman 1985; Harris 1986), but the students in this study did not rate the computing tutorials containing these strategies highly.

By contrast, the tutorials rated as "highly" satisfactory were characterized by brief interchanges between student and tutor that were narrowly focused on specific items within the student's program. Through these interchanges the student came to articulate the problem as the tutor prompted with several fact-finding questions and pauses for response.

The following examples, a "somewhat" satisfactory and a "highly" satisfactory session, illustrate the differences in how problems were handled in two of these sessions.

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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 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g., Aug. 15 for the Oct. issue).

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

"Somewhat" Satisfactory Tutorial

- S: I fixed it up and then I was putting in some new stuff, a different PRINT statement, and I got it [segmentation error] again.
- T: OK, what it means is you're trying to access some location that the computer can't reach. What it usually means is—are you using arrays?
- S: Yah.
- T: OK. What it usually means is you're trying to go out of bounds in your arrays. Like suppose you have an array that goes from 150. Try to take an array of 70, it'll look, you know, past where the array is and where all this memory is and it'll just stop. It can't get that. So you need to make sure all your array references are within bounds.
- S: OK.
- T: EPTIM Q number might not be in the bounds that you declared for EPTIM .
- S: OK.
- T: So you should go through your coding and check to see if there's a possibility the Q number might be out of bounds. You might put an IF statement before that. If the Q number is within the bounds of the array, then you can assign it to that part of the array.
- S: Is it all right for me to use DBX?
- T: Yah.
- S: I used DBX last time and it was [unintelligible on tape].
- T: OK, did it tell you where the segmentation fault was? I mean how did you use DBX?
- S: I didn't know how to—
- T: OK, what you do is, when you compile it, it'll write what the options are if you run DBX. So just type DBX 8 DOT OUT and

In this example the tutor asked very few

questions. Instead he diagnosed possible problems and explained the solutions to the student. The student then had to apply the explanations to the program.

Contrast this "somewhat" satisfactory example with the tutor's actions in the following session.

"Highly" Satisfactory Tutorial

- T: Here where you said *names of head*, is that an array too?
- S: Yah, it's a one dimensional array.
- T: Well, here you're using it as a number. That's not right either...is it? What do you mean by *head*? Do you mean a certain element of *head*?
- S: The first person in line.
- T: OK, who would that be?
- S: Ummm.
- T: Back in the main program. How would you describe the first person in line? They'd be some element in these arrays, right?
- S: Right.
- T: Which one?
- S: The first person would be, uh, well, what you want to print out for the first person is the name of—
- T: OK, but a name is an array.
- S: All right.
- T: Which element of the array is the name of the first person?
- S: OK, that changes.
- T: OK, what does it change to?
- S: Um, um, for each line it changes from one to the maximum length, from zero to maximum length.
- T: OK, so *name* is two-dimensional. One of the dimensions is for each line, right?

- S: Ummhmm.
- T: And the other one is for a position in line.
- S: Right.
- T: All right. So as you go through the servers...
- S: The server tells you which line.
- T: Which line. Now which dimension is that on *names*?

The questioning in the second tutorial continued until the student came up with a solution, "So, like, put NAME PARENTHESSES HEAD PARENTHESSES SERVER COMMA SERVER," to which the tutor responded "Bingo" and elaborated briefly on how she could apply the same procedure to other items in her problem. The tutorial drew on specific elements in the student's text, such as "name" and "head," so that the connection between the procedures being discussed and the student's work was always clear. Since the student was articulating the steps, she was directly involved in the actions that were carried out during the session.

In a study reported recently, Walker and Elias (1987) found similar results. In highly-rated conferences tutors based their discussions on comments made by the students, elicited criteria that defined quality, and encouraged evaluation of students' work in terms of those criteria. In the "highly" satisfactory tutorial above we also find the tutor using the student's words as a basis for the probing questions that lead a student step by step through an analysis of the problem, establishing criteria for success as they go. Low-rated conferences in Walker and Elias' study were characterized by explanations in which the tutor took over the work of the tutorial and told the student how to perform. The "somewhat" satisfactory programming tutorial in this study showed the same sort of tutorial explanations. The explanations were correct, but the student had to make the connection to his problem outside the tutorial. Too often such connections are unclear.

In Conclusion

When the tutors at the Computing Center talked about their tutorial experiences,

they frequently discussed the similarities between writing and programming. They mentioned the need for good style, the effects of purpose and audience, and the psychological energy needed for both writing and programming. With so much in common, it is no surprise that we can learn from one another. The computing center tutorials described here highlight communication strategies that can make tutorials more effective. They remind us to be sure as we tutor that the students we help actively participate both in finding the problem and in working out the solution. By working through these examples with other tutors and trainees, we can learn techniques that will help us improve our own communication styles.

Nancy J. Allen
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- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- Walker, Carolyn P., and David Elias. "Writing Conference Talk: Factors Associated for High- and Low-rated Writing Conferences." *Research in the Teaching of English* 21, 3 (1987): 226-85.

Contributions Invited

We are soliciting contributions for a volume which will examine/reexamine composition research in light of current calls to value diversity. To what extent has our research community attended to diversity and to what extent has it focused on the "generically human"? One-page abstracts for proposed essays can be submitted to Emily Jessup, English Composition Board, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. Deadline: Feb. 15, 1991.

Evaluating the Writing Lab: How Do We Know That We Are Helping?

In the March 1989 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Jim Bell presented a content analysis of articles which have appeared in the *WLN* over the past three and one-half years. As a new subscriber, I found his analysis helpful in catching up with what *WLN* "regulars" have been reading and writing about. I also found it thought-provoking, particularly in its challenge for articles about how we know that what we are doing is working. Given that in the past year my staff and I have been endeavoring to delineate for faculty and administrators at the University where we work the myriad services that we do, or could, provide, and that as a part of this project we began to establish evaluation criteria, it occurred to me that I might have something to contribute to colleagues who are attempting to coordinate and evaluate the variety of services that writing labs offer. I should say at the outset that I am not a writing lab director. Although help with writing is one of the things that we offer at the University of New England Learning Assistance Center, we also offer tutorial support for all of the courses in the undergraduate core curriculum, remedial courses in both writing and math, study skills workshops, and a comprehensive individualized program for learning disabled students. In addition, we are responsible for all the entry assessments done for freshmen and transfer students. However, like others of you who work in/direct writing labs, I am a writing instructor, and am committed to giving my students the best possible writing support in all of its permutations. Like you, I am continuously considering the possibility of offering the "miscellaneous" services mentioned by Jim Bell: Should I institute a grammar hotline? Conversation workshops for ESL students? Poetry workshops for advance writers? Grant writing workshops for university staff and faculty?

As Director of Learning Assistance, I too supervise a staff of incredibly hardworking, dedicated peer and professional tutors, for whose training and morale I am responsible. Our learning lab, like yours, bears the burdens of self-justification to faculty and administrators, lack of sufficient space and equipment,

and underfunding for material and human resources. Finally, we too are wrangling with Mr. Bell's question: how do we know that what we're doing is helpful and worth expanding?

For the past several years, we have used "head counts" and anecdotal information to justify our existence to the powers-that-be. Every month we tabulate usage figures: how many students, for how many visits, in what major, and referred by whom. As Bell pointed out, whether as philosophers, practitioners, or both, we *know* that we're making a difference, but we must be able to show that to others who do not work with us daily.

Last January, five of the Learning Assistance Center and Individual Learning Program (the program for learning disabled students) staff spent our intersession writing what turned out to be the combination of a description of services that we already provide and a master plan for services that we would like to incorporate. We wrote this "State of the State cum Proposal" in a management-by-objectives format, i.e., every aspect of our operation is an outgrowth of a statement of purpose and the reflection of five overarching goals, for each of which we listed a number of specific objectives, methodologies, time frames, and desired outcomes. A crucial component of this document, and the piece which I will focus on here, was our plan for program evaluation. I should note that the evaluation component is still evolving, that we are working on refining it, and that the data that we have collected are, at this point, merely of a preliminary-baseline nature. It is also important that I point out that we are our own evaluators. In an ideal situation, we would have sufficient funding to bring in an evaluation team from outside of the university. Perhaps in time this will happen; until then, we are doing our best to substantiate our claim (from a variety of perspectives) that we are one of the most crucial student services available on campus.

Rationale for Two Kinds of Evaluation

The goal of program evaluation is to

provide data for informed decision-making. A specific evaluation of any program outlines a process for gathering relevant data and identifies who will use the data for what purpose, e.g. accountability, feedback, dissemination, etc. A *formative* evaluation targets data to answer questions and facilitate decisions about the daily activities of the program, while a *summative* evaluation focuses upon the overall success of the program and provides a rationale for the program's existence. In both cases, the evaluation delineates what is to be evaluated, when it will be done, and what constitutes success. Lastly, evaluation can be a tool for managing aspirations for program excellence after accountability requirements are met.

Our program evaluation plan adheres to the foregoing guidelines. It addresses the need for accountability within the University and provides feedback to me, as program director, and to the staff/faculty for the purposes of improving both the program and staff/faculty performance. Moreover, the evaluation criteria aim beyond accountability to address the aspirations of faculty in their striving toward program excellence by including data-gathering for dissemination (to other programs) and theory-building functions. The challenge inherent in the evaluation process is to operationalize individual perceptions of program quality. Thus, during the development of the proposal, all Center staff members (including student representatives) were encouraged to participate as much as possible.

Description

The management-by-objectives style of the proposal is, in actuality, a bona fide evaluation process because once the goals and objectives have been defined, the evaluation process has begun. The five goals operationalize how the Learning Assistance and Individual Learning Programs will prioritize their resources. The objectives qualify the goals by listing the methods, time frames, and desired outcomes as a means for measuring goal attainment. Since the proposal contains a mixture of short- and long-term objectives, the achievement of some objectives can be definitively measured as accomplishments, while measurements of other objectives are approximations of achievement. Several modes of evaluation are being used, ranging from a simple review of records to a more complex client satisfaction survey. For example, quality

assurance for a particular objective at the formative level could involve the design and administration of a client satisfaction survey or the administration of a rating scale to assess the psycho-social environment. At the summative level, quality assurance could involve our Advisory Panel (faculty members representing each of the departments in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University, serving voluntarily) participating in structured interviews with clients or a peer review by professionals operating a similar program at another university. Since the objectives, methods, time frames, and desired outcomes have been specified, all that remains to complete the evaluation component are: 1) identification of the procedure; 2) assignment of the responsibility; and 3) development of questions to be answered.

Evaluation Criteria for the Learning Assistance Center

Our proposal addressed the areas of education, research, training, assessment, and instructional networking. For each of these areas we listed objectives, methods, time frames, and desired outcomes, as well as the three evaluation components listed above: procedures, responsibility, and questions. Because the readership of the *WLN* will be interested in what can be generalized to a writing lab, I will give only those criteria included in the section on the University of New England Learning Assistance Center. The questions listed below *are not inclusive*, and each question potentially generates more questions. Ultimately it is the individual(s) responsible who must decide what amount of data can be managed and used effectively at any given time.

OBJECTIVE #1: To identify the assistance needs of College of Arts and Sciences students who visit the Center.

Procedure:

- Review entry assessments of the first-time users.

- Survey users regarding their perceived needs.

- Track those users who engage in more formal assessment procedures.

Responsibility: Center Director and staff (faculty as well as peer and professional tutors)

Questions:

- How much assessment is necessary?
- How can self-referrals best be served?
- Should all users be required to have an individual interview?
- How can tutors facilitate assessment referrals?

OBJECTIVE #2: To provide appropriate academic support to meet assistance needs.

Procedure:

- Tabulate frequency of usage of various services.
- Administer student satisfaction questionnaire on Center services.
- Administer staff evaluation forms.

Responsibility: Center Director and staff

Questions:

- What services are in the greatest demand?
- What is the degree of satisfaction with each service?
- What is the degree of satisfaction with individual staff members?
- What is the frequency of referrals to the Center?
- From whom do these referrals originate?

OBJECTIVE #3: To assess abilities and offer courses in areas including, but not limited to, writing, math, problem solving, reading, and study skills.

Procedure:

- Course evaluation (separate from faculty evaluation).

Responsibility: Center Director and faculty

Questions:

- How did the students perceive the value of the course(s)?
- How can the success of courses be measured—future grades, skills testing using initial assessment instrument, research design?

OBJECTIVE #4: To function as an initial screening and subsequent referral site for previously unidentified learning disabled students.

Procedure: Review methods and outcomes periodically.

Responsibility: Center Director with Learning Assistance and Individual Learning faculty

Questions:

- To what extent must Learning Assistance staff be educated regarding diagnosis of learning disabilities?
- Can methods adequately discriminate between learning problems and potential disability?
- Should Learning Assistance faculty be responsible for using screening instruments?

OBJECTIVE #5: To develop a community outreach component which provides Learning Assistance services and Individual Learning Program referrals for members of surrounding communities, based upon assessment results.

Procedure: Needs assessment of community.

Responsibility: Center Director and staff

Questions:

- What types of service would interest the community?

- What would be the demand for these services?
- How many staff hours would be necessary?
- What are the potential costs/benefits to the Center and to the University?

Conclusion

In addition to the information that we gather by attempting to answer the questions listed above, I continue to put great stock in anecdotal information that reaches me either directly or through Center faculty and staff. (When a non-traditional student tells me that she would not have enrolled in the University had it not been for the tutorial services that we provide, I write that down and include it in my annual report to the Academic Dean and the President; I also share it at department meetings.) I pay particular attention to notations made by the peer tutors in students' files and stories recounted in the tutoring journals. This kind of information is unsolicited and "from the trenches," and therefore extremely valuable.

In the long run, I don't know how our attempt at evaluation-beyond-head-counting will go; from time to time I fear that too elaborate an evaluation system will begin to take on a life of its own and become an end in itself. Like Jim Bell, I am interested in what others are doing, and I would like to second his call. What ways can we use to see how well we are meeting our goals? What do you do?

Jaime Hylton
University of New England
Biddeford, Maine

Study Skills Program Available

The author of the advice column *Dear Study Lady* has developed a script and transparencies for a 90-minute study skills lecture, accompanied by suggestions for developing follow-up support groups. For information, write to Nancy-Laurel Pettersen, Emory University, Box 21116, Atlanta, GA 30322.

New from NCTE

The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One. Ed. Pamela B. Farrell. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. 175 pp., paper, \$9.95 (NCTE members, \$7.50). Available from NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. Stock no. 21187-0015.

This book is the result of a survey research project by Pamela Farrell, director of the writing center at Red Bank Regional High School in Little Silver, New Jersey. Farrell and seventeen other authors contributed articles that discuss the process of securing the principal's support, setting goals, working out physical arrangements, staffing, and scheduling. Other articles cover topics such as training tutors and professional staff, fostering student participation, supervising a center, keeping records, using computers, and collaborating with other high school teachers, colleges, and community. Appendices include candid comments from writing center directors, a bibliography, and a list of high school writing centers arranged by state. In short, it's a uniquely appropriate resource for all present—and prospective—high school writing center directors.

Word Weaving: A Creative Approach to Teaching and Writing Poetry, by David Johnson. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990. 181 pp., paperbound, \$11.95 (NCTE members, \$8.95). Available from NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. Stock number 58226-0015.

For writing labs that offer assistance with creative writing or that hold creative writing workshops, this new NCTE book will be a useful resource. The advice Johnson offers and the activities he suggests form a do-it-yourself handbook for amateur creative writers. He includes samples of student poetry (junior high school through college), discusses the essentials of poetry—including images, metaphors, forms, and so on—and offers help in finding subject matter.

Tutors' Column

Writing to Discover

"If I only knew then what I know now," I think as the elevator crawls to the third floor. I feel the usual butterflies before standing in front of a classroom full of strangers, talking in the "first draft" about the Writing Center. Not too many months ago I sat in the same desks, challenged by assignments, pressured by the deadlines, and forever in the process of trying to drag a thesis and outline out of myself for papers. It often took days to come to the place where I felt ready to begin writing, all because I tried to formulate the paper in my head long before putting my fingers on the keyboard.

"But," I think, "now I'm a missionary with the good news that writing doesn't have to be a pain—it can be a discovery." The elevator door slides open, and I emerge carrying my only visual aid: a poster-sized cartoon drawing with fifteen frames showing my personal writing process from assignment to final draft. When talking about the Writing Center services, I tell the students that at a writing workshop last fall I discovered my major problem area simply by drawing each step of my personal writing process. Then, after seeing some other participants' cartoons on the overhead projector, I realized our common humanity: no matter on what level, people think and work in a similar fashion.

As I head for my supervisor's English 101 class, I remember one of my last major college papers for a Japanese Culture class: "The Shakkei Garden and Kawabata's *Sounds of the Mountain: an Analogy*." When I started the assignment, the direction I took seemed vague because the connections only tenuously presented themselves to me. As was my usual custom, I tried to formulate a thesis and outline to begin writing, but because of the deadline, I was forced to write what I was thinking and reading. This pre-writing exercise cut my mental anguish in half.

I remember the many drafts I wrote and revised with a cut and paste method, the

constant retyping, and the days I read the draft out loud umpteen times to myself in the car with the windows rolled up. The whole writing process became life without end: eat, sleep, drink, and dream the vast incubation of ideas while trying to mesh them into a cohesive, coherent whole. I'm the first to tell a student that writing is painful and yes, draining; but at the end, there's something so satisfying about holding a hard-won manuscript in one's hand. It's not far from the experience a pregnant woman has as she waits in the hospital labor room for the next contraction—when she's into it, there's no turning back, no matter how much she fears the outcome or the pain she must endure. When the baby is born and finally in her arms, she proudly claims that the amount of personal suffering was worth it all.

My supervisor sees me outside the classroom door. She introduces me to her class, and I feel the usual shortness of breath that grabs me even after my tenth in-class presentation. My nervousness shows as I hold the poster up for the students to see.

"At the Writing Center we won't proof-read or edit your paper," I tell them, "but we will go over it with you to show you some editing strategies."

The sea of faces before me are blank. "I'm not reaching them," I think, "and this is one presentation I wanted to be effective." My supervisor senses the wall I face. She asks me about the cartoon. "Explain your drawing to us," she says. I begin to get specific about my experience as a student and as a freelance writer. I tell the class my problem area, moving from assignment to first draft, is exemplified by the first two frames of the poster where an exasperated dinner-plate face grunts out at the audience. "This period of not knowing what to do or how to do it used to take days or even two weeks," I say pointing to the question marks floating above the face where an exclamation point should be.

I walk through my habits frame by frame, adding comments. My cartoon includes the times I research, write, revise and discard, get feedback on a draft, sleep on the project, drink tea in front of the TV, rewrite again and then hopefully get a good grade for my efforts. By the attentive faces I see, the class is now with me. They know I've been one of them in the trenches, up to our chins in papers and exams and about to go under because we were greedy to carry too many hours. We're like soldiers who go into battle—but this is just basic training.

To conclude I tell them how I'm working on my problem area. "I'm practicing some of the idea-generating strategies we use in the Writing Center," I say. Instead of trying to work things out in my head like I've always done, now when I get a story idea for a free-lance project, I immediately go to the computer and for fifteen minutes write out everything I know or want to know about the subject. After writing I discover my direction, my interests, my knowledge, my ignorance, and I might even find a thesis near the end.

I see two or three students brighten: the exclamation point. Maybe I'll see them in the Writing Center testifying about "writing to discover." I leave the class energized for the next Writing Center presentation to a pre-med physiology class. Presenting "The Writing Process According to Diane" for those students will be challenging but applicable. Writers are all in the same boat.

"If I only knew then what I know now," I think, walking out the side door.

Diane Kulkarni
Peer Tutor
Weber State College
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Applications Invited

The Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators will be held from June 29 to July 26 at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

The 1991 Kellogg Institute will train faculty, counselors, and administrators from developmental and learning assistance programs in current techniques for promoting

learning improvement. For further information, contact Elaine Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (704-262-3057). Deadline: March 15, 1991.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

Feb. 15: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in New York, NY
Contact: David Fletcher, Lehman College, B38 Carman, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. West, Bronx, NY 10468

April 1: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Highland Heights, KY
Contact: Paul Ellis, Writing Center, No. Kentucky U., Highland Heights, KY 41076

April 11-13: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Birmingham, AL
Contact: David Chapman, English, Samford U., Birmingham, AL 35229

Call for Papers Southeastern Writing Center Assn.

April 11-13, 1991
Birmingham, AL

*"Writing Beyond the Curriculum:
Approaching the 21st Century"*

Keynote speaker: Elaine Maimon

Send proposals to Dr. David Chapman, English, Samford University, Box 2207, Birmingham, AL 35229. Deadline for submissions: January 15, 1991.

Authority: Issues and Insights

Writing centers are unique places. The services they provide often extend far beyond the academics, frequently serving as havens for students in the midst of both social and academic distress. Writing centers provide a kind of safe, non-threatening environment where students can air their complaints, express their concerns, fears and anxieties, and share their joys both academic and social, knowing that their conversations will remain private and confidential.

Given the multiple purposes of the writing center, we as tutors have many roles. To aid our students, we must have insights into our authority and the knowledge of how to return that authority to the student. We must understand each of our roles, the major issue inherent in that situation, and how, as tutors, we must move between our roles, designated by the student's short and long term needs. However, before explaining our tutoring model, I first need to describe our Learning Center. Like most writing centers, it serves a wide spectrum of tutees: the 17-23-year-old traditional student, the over-24 non-traditional (who often has more emotional baggage than a queen's entourage), the slightly learning disabled, the non-native speaker, and the list goes on. We have open writing drop-in hours (no appt. necessary), but unlike most schools, we also have the luxury of a one-credit writing tutorial given in conjunction with the student's writing class. Recommended students meet with one writing tutor for thirty minutes per week for a semester. It is a pass-fail course, and to pass one must only attend weekly.

In our theoretical model the tutoring situation moves through three stages, and thus the tutor plays three different roles. In the first situation, the student comes to a writing drop-in hour for the first time with a paper usually near completion that is due within the next day or so. The tutor in this situation plays the role of guide, defined as one who shows the way by directing or advising, usually by reason of greater experience with the course to be pursued. In many ways, the tutor in this situation is like a trail guide because he knows the beginning and the end of the trail; he knows at what stage this paper is and what paths need to be taken for it to reach its conclusion. However, because of his experience, like any

good guide, he will also ask insightful questions. It serves no purpose to direct a student down a path for which he is not prepared or for which he has no time.

The tutor as guide must assess what the student wants from this tutoring session as well as what can be realistically accomplished given the student's time constraints and the paper's due date. Although the tutor may see that major structural changes are needed in the paper, the student may only want it read for mechanics. Thus, the major issue of the tutoring session is how non-directive or directive the tutor should be. If you are like us, we hate students coming in for the "quick fix"—"Put a comma here, get rid of that fragment there"—and we very politely make that known. However, often there is more at stake in this session than a few commas. This one-shot meeting with little or no personal attachment between student and tutor can make or break any future ties with the Learning Center. The tutor as guide must find a middle ground between a completely non-directed approach to the paper, which the student might find completely unsatisfying, and a totally directed approach, which the student might love but the tutor knows is not academically sound. As a guide, the tutor knows that this single paper is not the end of the writing "trail," but only one small path. The tutor at this stage encourages the student to return to the Learning Center earlier in his writing journey. However, unless the student has found some satisfaction and feels that the time spent with the tutor (guide) was helpful, he won't return, just as he wouldn't return to a guide who led him up the rock face of the mountain when he asked him to be led on a one-hour beginner trail.

In the second situation, a student returns for the third or fourth time to work with the tutor at the Learning Center. The tutor knows the student on a more personal level than at the previous stage. A tutor's second role becomes that of counselor, defined as a knowledgeable person whom one goes to for advice. By nature the counselor-client relationship is a private, trusting one. A good counselor must be able to see the big picture, to listen carefully to determine what is going on in the student's writing. In society, we go to counselors over the long term; counselors

cannot aid us in solving all our problems in a single session. So, too, with tutor counselors. As Muriel Harris says, because of our experience and subject matter knowledge, the tutor as counselor can give the student support and security (38). The counselor's primary role is to be a good listener. As a counselor we must resist the temptation to diagnose a student's writing too quickly; instead as Thomas Carnicelli writes, we must patiently "listen for clues" (118). We must give students time to move towards a self-diagnosis of the critical issues in their writing. At this transitional stage, we can suggest possible treatment, but we must encourage greater participation on the students' part.

The third stage of the tutoring model is that of tutor as mentor. A mentor is defined as a wise, trusted counselor or teacher, one who encourages or promotes. In this stage the mentor serves more as a resource, a trusted counsel rather than as a long term counselor. It is more a relationship of collaborators. In this stage the student has begun to internalize the questions that the counselor asked in stage two. The tutee now asks these questions of herself and looks to her mentor only for reassurance. The tutee views herself as a writer now rather than as a student. She successfully uses the writing tools she gained in the previous stages. She has come to understand her own writing process and can accept that each written product is just one stepping stone on her writing journey.

In this stage the tutor as mentor must know when to let go. Because the mentor knows the student's strengths and weaknesses, she can foresee where problems might arise. But, she also knows that the tutee has the tools and the power to be a good writer. The tutor as mentor must step back and provide empathy and suggestions when asked. The tutor and mentor have become collaborators. The mentor has returned the authority to the student, and the student slowly accepts it.

We came up with this model based on our evaluation of the most successful tutoring sessions in the past fall semester. It became clear to us that the most successful sessions—that is, the ones in which the student writing showed the greatest improvement—were the ones that progressed along a steady continuum. The following three scenarios are based on sixteen actual conferencing sessions. They

deal with the major issues in the three different stages of the tutorial.

In the first scene, the tutor is faced with a first time "drop-in" student who is working on her very first college essay. The student at this stage in writing is unaware of the larger issues at work in her writing. Through guided questions, the tutor is helping to move the student to see the larger demands within the assignment itself. For the sake of focus and brevity, only core issues within a normal half-hour session are addressed.

Tutor: You've told me this assignment is for your English 110 class and that you are supposed to describe one important event in your life. Is that right?

Lyn: Yeah, but to tell the truth, I had to write this one in a hurry. Since this is just a draft, my instructor said we can revise this. So I just have to get it handed in, and after I finished it, I didn't know where to put some of the punctuation in the dialogue I used. I'm not sure of those stupid rules. Will you find what's wrong?

Tutor: There are some tricky rules to punctuation and quotation marks, and I can work on this with you. But first, could you give me a bigger picture about your writing? Could you tell me why you chose this event to write about?

Lyn: Sure. This other woman and I, well, we went through a lot together at our other school, and this event is about when I go to see her after graduation.

Tutor: O.K. But why was this trip so important to you?

Lyn: Well, we hadn't seen each other in a few months, and Carol wanted me to come and help her fix up her yard. We're both divorced, with kids, and we were really pleased that we could do so much "man's work," like digging up old trees and stuff.

Tutor: I can see how close the two of you are in this dialogue. It really works to show your relationship.

Lyn: But you see what I mean about the

punctuation? When I'm not sure where to put a comma, I just stick it under the quotation mark!

Tutor: That's a good trick! But the general rule is: all punctuation goes inside the quotation marks. Here's a handout that is pretty clear. From this, can you see where to place the commas in your own writing?

Lyn: Yeah—right here? I think I've got it now.

Tutor: Good. But besides the punctuation, Lyn, I think you could still use some more descriptive language in this piece.

Lyn: I'm not really sure what you mean.

Tutor: For instance, you and Carol are really important to this piece—I can see that in the dialogue—but you don't give the reader any physical description of either one of you.

Lyn: Is that important?

Tutor: Well, in description, your main task is to focus in very closely on details.

Lyn: Well, what details should I use?

Tutor: Why don't you make a list of any details you remember—clothes, hair, facial expressions, even eye color—of the two of you—and then you might decide that these images help the reader see you two more clearly.

Lyn: O.K., Thanks, I'll try it.

Tutor: Come back if you need any more help.

From this dialogue, we can see that the tutor moved the student to the larger issues of writing by asking directed questions—about nine in this short session alone. The student left the session with some concrete tools for writing—tools that addressed the student's concern for punctuation and the tutor's concern for development of the content.

In the second stage of the tutoring process, around week four or five, the tutor starts taking a back seat, listening carefully for

the student's clues about her writing. As Carnicelli says, this listening role might be the most important one for the student/tutor relationship—and he adds that it is the one most overlooked (117). In the following scene, note when the tutor “moves over” so that the student can work out her own writing issues.

Lyn: Well, I got this draft back. I got a C/C+ on it.

Tutor: O.K. So what do you think about this writing at this point?

Lyn: I don't know. I went back and tried to describe things more, but I guess I didn't do enough of that.

Tutor: Is that what most of the comments and suggestions were on this?

Lyn: Yeah. My professor still thinks that I'm telling too much. If I hear the phrase “show, don't tell” one more time, I think I'm going to scream!

Tutor: You seem to be getting frustrated. What do you think you can do now?

Lyn: Hum...(long pause—looks to tutor for advice, but the tutor remains quiet, but interested). Well, (big sigh), this writing is really a bitch. But see here? He wants me to describe me and Carol even more. I did say she looked like Olive Oyl—and I thought that was good. But here—he asks me what color my stupid truck is! This thing could go on forever.

Tutor: Yes, it could, Lyn. The task for you is to focus in very closely on one event going on. For example, *where* exactly do you think this relationship between you and Carol is shown the most?

Lyn: When we're outside. In the rain. Trying to get that old stump out of the ground.

Tutor: Well, how did you get it out?

Lyn: Well, it took us about two hours. We kept trying to tie it with a rope, and the stupid rope kept slipping off, and then my truck—my “rusty, old Toyota pickup” kept getting stuck in the mud. You should have seen us when it was

all over. I looked like...(pause)

Tutor: Like what?

Lyn: (coming to some realization now) Like a soggy dog— and Carol, she looked like a soggy old scarecrow!

Tutor: Great! I can see you now— and it's quite a picture!

Lyn: O.K., O.K. I've got some time to work on this. But I gotta run— the kids have dentist appointments right after school.

Tutor: Good luck! See you later.

The student in this session was somewhat frustrated with her writing at one point. However, by listening carefully to what the student really needed to say in her paper, the tutor was able to encourage and support the student in her own writing choices; thus, the student came to a better understanding of her writing.

In the third and final scenario, the student and tutor have moved along the continuum, and, by the end of the semester, they have reached a comfortable place, a place of mutual respect, a place of discovery and satisfaction for both. The tutor functions as a mentor. In this last week of tutoring, the last of sixteen continuous weeks, the student has clearly come to a deeper understanding of her own writing process, and the demands of good, effective writing.

Lyn: I've been thinking about what we talked about last week— about how many choices we have as writers. In a way, it's kind of overwhelming— I mean, it seems like the writing is never really finished. But I think you were right about choosing words carefully— especially verbs in that dialogue section.

Tutor: Do you think changing the "saids" made a difference in this essay?

Lyn: Oh, sure. That section is definitely stronger. But I know I can still do more.

Tutor: In what way, Lyn?

Lyn: Well, I put this thing away for a few

days— like you suggested— I just took the weekend off to play with the kids, shop, do my hair, stuff like that— and out of the blue, when I wasn't even thinking about this paper— I think I was under the hair dryer at the time— I suddenly saw that stump, that thing that Carol and I were struggling with— could be more than just an old log.

Tutor: I'm not sure what you mean.

Lyn: Well, you see, it's like Carol and I have been fighting men all of our adult lives, and that tree stump was the last thing in our way.

Tutor: Ah!

Lyn: So, I thought that I could show the reader how that stump was really a symbol— more like a man than a tree. What do you think?

Tutor: That sounds great. Tell me how you're going to do it!

Lyn: You asked me once what I looked like in the rain— and I said like a soggy dog— and then, I started wondering what that stump really looked like, all wet, and old, and sort of half way in the ground and half way out...and (pause)

Tutor: And what?

Lyn: Well, I thought at first it looked gross like my ex-husband!

Tutor: Lyn! That's great for you, but no one else knows what your husband looks like!

Lyn: Yeah, I know. So instead, I just kept flashing that tree back and forth in my mind, and then it came to me— it looked just like a pitiful old man, a beggar, really, kind of half alive, and half dead. You know, one foot in the ground and one foot out.

Tutor: The ground— maybe like a grave?

Lyn: That's it! A ragged old beggar, with one foot in the grave, and one foot out! That's it! And when Carol and I finally succeed in getting the stump out, we

free it and we're free, too!

Tutor: Lyn, that's really terrific. Any other thought about this before you finish?

Lyn: Nope. I'm going to go write this while it's fresh in my mind. I like it. You know, when I first started this paper, I really couldn't see why lots of the things you talked about—and my professor talked about—were that important. I mean, I thought "describe something"—big deal. My kids could do that? But I think now it came together. It's a different paper now. And I think this time, it's better. But you know, writing is still tough.

Tutor: Yep. It is!

Truly, the excitement in this kind of relationship is that in the end, the student is more sure, more confident, more prepared to write on her own. The tutor, although appreciated, is not a necessity any more. The values that started with the tutor have, in essence, been transferred to the student.

In conclusion, we can see that the tutor has very clear roles and responsibilities in each stage of the continuum. But it is also necessary for a tutor to be aware of a student's perception of her own writing. In the first stage, the student looks for an external source, usually the tutor, to fix or solve her writing problems. She wants very clear directives from someone else. The second stage is a transitional one and often a very uncomfortable one for the student. She still wants that external source to solve her problems, but she is starting to internalize the process of writing, and this begins a period of growth. She is beginning to ask herself probing questions about her writing. In the final stage of the continuum, the student is now comfortable with her writing, has internalized the writing process, and has become a self-critic.

This model presents an ideal situation but, as we all know, other than death and taxes, nothing is certain—especially when dealing with so many types of students. Within this recursive process of conferencing, we, as tutors, must be insightful enough to move back and forth among the roles of guide, counselor

and mentor to meet the individual needs of our students.

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Writing Center Travels to Residence Halls

This fall we have been able to offer a writing center in the residence halls for three nights a week. The best part of our expansion is that the funding comes from the budget of the Division of Student Life. Last winter, the Director of Auxiliary Services called to discuss Freshman English connections with the residence halls. His idea was to integrate more fully the students' academic and living environments. I invited him to explore the possibilities with the instructors themselves. The initial reaction was overwhelmingly negative. Of course they did not want to move their offices to a residence hall! Teaching a class in the residence hall would be difficult because of the lack of academic associations. In general, the instructors felt that such options would place them on a par with summer camp counselors.

Once we cleared the air of these seemingly insurmountable horrors, we took a close look at some positive options for integration. Moving the Write Place, our campus writing center, to the residence hall for early evening hours appeared to be just the alternative everyone could agree on. So we initiated a trial effort to give students an opportunity for writing assistance from 6-8 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights. We selected a hall and established an incredibly complicated system of operation that involved the students' signing in at the front desk, securing a key to the otherwise already secured third floor, calling the tutor on duty to unlock the

door from the inside, and finally meeting in a room so quiet that the ticking clock was deafening. Just getting to the tutor was tougher than writing the first draft of the paper. After three weeks of a system that grew increasingly ridiculous to the tutors, we abandoned the security and set up a table in the lobby of the main floor of the residence hall. All we needed was high visibility and a place somewhat removed from the sounds of the television. With a sign that simply stated "The Write Place, 6-8 p.m., T-W-T," we soon had more than enough business. Now, students would see the sign and go to their rooms and return directly with papers in progress. No more signing in, no more advance planning: the tutor helped as many as he or she could in the two-hour block.

That experiment allowed us the time to work out the logistics of our traveling writing center. We evaluated, adjusted, and advertised accordingly. This fall, the incoming freshman students were all made aware of the Write Place hours and locations for daytime and evening. For the students, there has been no confusion about where the Write Place is at any given time. Also, we find that students who no longer live in the residence halls are returning

to seek help in this comfortable environment. In nine weeks of operation for six hours a week, we helped 80 students, and toward the end of the quarter our numbers continued to increase. The Write Place is staffed by instructors of Freshman English who are paid \$10 per hour. For the Write Place, which stays in the library, the Dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities funds the operation. For the Write Place in the residence halls, the funding is covered by the Office of Student Life. The residence hall administrators seem delighted to have us there.

We have been successful in the original plan to integrate in some way the students' academic and living environments. We have expanded the number of hours in which we are available to assist the students with writing problems. We have increased the opportunities for our Freshman English instructors to earn additional money. We have found a new budget source that may otherwise have never occurred to us. In all, the Write Place is a multiple victory.

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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