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....

"Visiting," "talking," "collaborating," and "sharing" seem to be the operative words in this month's articles. Since many of us are now back at our tutoring tables after visiting, talking, collaborating, and sharing at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Boston, this emphasis is particularly appropriate. A bit of history might even reaffirm how appropriate this theme is. Many years ago (more than I care to own up to), a bunch of us were at a CCCC conference, in a session desperately trying to help each other figure out what a writing lab was. The interchange of voices and willingness to help each other invigorated us all. Not wanting that to end as people attending the next session began filtering into the room, I asked those attending our session if we needed a newsletter to stay in touch during the year. I gathered as many names as I could when we were all being pushed out the door. That became the nucleus of this newsletter group. It's good to see that the tradition of talking, helping, and sharing continues.....

•Muriel Harris, editor

....inside....

On Being There: Reflections on Visits to Other Writing Centers

During part of my sabbatical in the spring of 1988 I went on the road, visiting writing centers and writing-across-the-curriculum programs in California and the Northwest: twenty schools altogether. I took along a list of broad questions, which I used mainly to make sure all topics were covered, but my real aim was simply to get myself invited into a lot of other writing centers and converse with a lot of directors. Even my questions altered somewhat as I went from visit to visit. Usually the conversations went their own way, and my note-taking pencil trotted along behind as best it could.

I inquired about the nature of the director's position; about how tutors are recruited, screened, trained, and evaluated; about funding, clerical help, scheduling of work hours and appointments, record-keeping, and handout and study materials. I hope you won't think me perverse if I don't report what I found out about all these things, except very indirectly and selectively. I put

much of it in the draft of this paper, but it just wasn't my center of gravity. What I really remember from those visits was the people, the atmosphere, the ideas and concerns, not so much the facts.

So, I want to get right to the effects those visits had on me and on the Boise State Writing Center.

The immediate idea to occur to me after those visits was to totally rearrange the BSU writing center. This idea took me by surprise, because it was the last thing I thought I would do again. Hadn't we already rearranged it a dozen times? But one day I realized it was arranged all wrong. The main entrance was at the wrong door. Changing the entry meant moving everything else around as well. Not only that, but much of the furniture was wrong and had to go, even though we'd had a lot of it specially made. The stand-up reception counter was too institutional. The pigeon-hole shelves were ugly. The tables were the rectangular folding kind where two people had to sit either too close together or too far apart. The walls were lined with study carrels, which reinforced the notion that writing is a solitary activity devoid of collaboration– exactly the opposite of the impression we wanted to convey. We had Physical Plant haul away the offending furniture, acquired a free desk from storage, and had the carpenters make round pedestal tables– thanks to our department chair, who found room for them in the equipment budget. We gave up a bit of tutoring space to create a lounge-reception area.We came in one Saturday and painted. When we were finished, the place had an entirely different feel; it was warmer and more inviting, and a lot less institutional.

And I was left wondering, where did the idea for all this come from? I didn't copy any of the centers I'd visited except in a few details. I suppose that after seeing them, I saw ours in a new way and almost intuitively understood what it needed. And that, I have come to realize, is a microcosm for the *overall* effect of that round of visits. I did borrow some specific ideas about training, record keeping, and other procedures. But the big changes have been indirect, intuitive, hard to pin down. This paper is my attempt to sort them out.

First, I think writing centers have evolved to a point where they can embrace more flexibility and even contradiction in the way they function. In this regard I keep thinking back to Peter Elbow's essay, "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." Elbow describes the teacher's role as divided by contrary responsibilities, one to uphold knowledge and standards, and the other to be the student's ally in the learning process. He argues that it does no good to try to reconcile or play down these contraries; such attempts weaken the teacher's commitment to one or both responsibilities. Instead, Elbow says, the teacher should embrace both roles wholeheartedly and find ways to alternate between them. The teacher should be a coach and helper, but then be prepared at the appropriate time to turn around and be the gatekeeper, the bouncer, the giver of grades. I wonder if tutors don't find themselves in analogous situations, perhaps in even more subtle ways. The collaborative learning that takes place in a tutoring session puts the tutor in the role of coach and helper. Yet the tutor must also judge how the client is doing, must monitor how the developing draft is measuring up to standards of good writing. The tutor has to do this without stepping over the line into the teacher's role of evaluator and grader. If in the middle of a tutoring session the client tries to sum up by saying, "So you're saying I should...." or "So you want me to....," then the tutor knows he has gone too far and must back off. He has to restore the client's ownership of the writing. It is harder to keep roles straight in tutoring

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than in teaching, because the contraries in the tutor's various roles are more subtle than the teacher's.

Another contrary is in the basic philosophy of what we are trying to do for people. Stephen North's famous axiom, "Our job is to change the writer, not the piece of writing" (438), holds only part of the truth. I think it's time to recognize that things are not that simple. A tutor taking the axiom too strictly can frustrate and alienate a client. When tutor and client are seated at a table with a draft, that draft is a presence, a third party in the conversation, and it cannot escape being the center of attention. The primary aim of some tutoring sessions should be to change the piece of writing. It is good for tutors to be aware of the tension between these contraries and to embrace them both. Besides, most of the time change in the piece of writing leads to change in the writer. That is not the main point, however: the main point is that every writer needs an audience, and no one ever outgrows the capacity to benefit from the writing center. Our aim is not to change writers so much that they no longer need us; we want them to feel they can always come back no matter how good they get.

When I talk about flexibility and embracing contraries, I am also thinking of what Irene Clark calls the unfortunate list of "nevers" that writing centers put in their tutoring handbooks: never write any part of a paper for a student, not even one phrase; never edit a paper for mechanical errors, never proofread a paper; never hold a pencil while tutoring; never touch the student's paper (7). I think writing centers have matured enough and are accepted well enough so they do not have to lay down such rules. I have seen some of my own tutors do more harm than good by refusing to proofread any part of a paper, or insist that a client look up all the misspellings, or go round in a slow futile minuet to get a client to come up with better wording for a sentence or new ways to develop an idea. Such rules come mainly out of over-caution—attempts to avoid anything that smacks of plagiarism or might prompt teachers to complain that the tutor has been giving clients "too much" help.[1] I think this mentality is what mainly soured my tutors on Meyer and Smith's book, *The Practical Tutor*, which in other ways is excellent. They found from experience that clients do not always respond to the inductive, hands-off, let-them-do-it-themselves kind of tutoring that Meyer and Smith demonstrate over and over in their sample dialogues. It's time we lightened up on those "nevers." My colleague Karen Uehling says about writing in general, "There are no rules but rules of thumb." I think the same should apply to tutoring writing.

Second, I have done some reflection on naming. Right now, "writing lab" is out, "writing center" is in. Some folks object to "lab" on the grounds that it sounds too clinical and remedial, and not a place that serves the whole writer. It's a place where pieces of you are sent to be dabbed on a slide and examined under a microscope. On my visits, I found mostly "centers." Where there were "labs," people tended to be apologetic about the name. In the Oregon state system this was especially so. No state facility can be called a "center" without approval of the legislature. And I guess approval is not forthcoming if the place isn't unique in the state.

But in defense of the word "lab," Mickey Harris offers an argument worth considering. A lab, she writes, is a place for "hands-on, trying-out work" (6). It is a place where people are free to try and fail and try again—both clients and tutors. In that light, "lab" is not such a bad name for the place. When I mentioned this argument to another writing center director at a conference, she replied, "I like 'writing center' because we are the center of writing on campus." I find that persuasive, too. Several years ago we did change from "lab" to "center." But what we wanted to accomplish has been considerably diluted on the BSU campus, which has gone center-happy. We have the Visitor Center, the Curriculum Resource Center, the Adult Learning Center, the Athletic Center, the Advising Center, the Counseling and Testing Center, the Data Center, the Morrison Center for the Performing Arts, the Simplot-Micron Technology Center, the Special Events Center, the Outdoor Rental Center, the Quick Copy Center, and so on and on. I sometimes wonder if we shouldn't change ourselves back into a "lab," if only to be different and increase our visibility.

My point contrary to what I so often hear, is that I don't feel it matters whether the place is called a center or a lab, unless there is a special need, such as to influence college administrators' perception of the place. But I have come to think it matters what we call the people who work there. Everywhere I went on my visits, I was struck by the professionalism of

these people, their enthusiasm, the pride and enjoyment they take in their work. We commonly call them tutors, but there are problems with the name. At the 4 C's in Seattle, Lex Runciman from Oregon State asked if we shouldn't call them something else. We're all aware that tutoring writing is unique in important ways. This is not to downgrade tutoring in other subjects, for all of it is complex. All tutors must adjust to a variety of learning styles and must try to change the learning styles of some clients. But writing tutors must be flexible in other ways, too. They deal not only with different learning styles but different writing processes. They must simultaneously get involved in the writing process with the client and stand outside it, to monitor how it is going. They must judge the quality of the writing but at the same time be careful not to usurp the writer's ownership or the writer's right and responsibility to make the decisions.

Moreover, they deal with every possible level of writing ability, from the most rudimentary to the most advanced. That may be the biggest difference of all between writing tutors and other tutors. The term "tutor" denotes someone who helps students who are unable to keep up with their coursework because they don't understand it. That truly doesn't seem to fit the tutoring of writing. In England it would, where "tutor" has a much broader meaning, but this isn't England. After Lex's presentation I went home and asked my tutors what they wanted to be called. Suggestions included "Writing Advisor" (rejected because it could be confused with "academic advisor"), "Writing Assistant" (rejected because it's the name of a word-processing program), and "Writing Consultant," which is the current favorite. I have problems with "consultant"; it sounds like someone who works alone, not as a member of a team– and also like someone who observes, gives advice, but doesn't get involved. The trend at some schools I know of seems to be toward "Writing Assistant," which strikes me as the best. Perhaps my people will realize that word processors come and go, but human writing assistants will endure.

Divided as we are on what to call ourselves, my staff is united against calling the people we serve "tutees." They don't utter the word (we dislike even the sound of it: too-tee), and they snicker when they run across it in professional writing. "Tutees" sound like people whom tutoring is done to; they do not sound like collaborative learners. I'm not being a linguistic purist. The word is a perfectly legitimate back-formation, which English speakers adopt all the time in words like *diagnose, grovel,* and *housebreak,* but this one sounds demeaning. We prefer to think of these people as clients.

Third, I've come to understand that how writing assistants are recruited makes all the difference. Just as I'd realized intuitively that the BSU center was arranged all wrong, I also realized that I'd been hiring tutors in the wrong way. I'd been sending out blanket notices aimed at students, asking for applicants. I insisted that the candidates did not have to be outstanding writers, as long as they liked to work with people. This is common practice at many writing centers, but it did not always work for us. Many of the tutors we got this way were indeed gems, but some were ineffective– for a number of reasons, but mainly because they weren't self-aware, they didn't understand their own writing that well and so didn't have a sound basis for dealing with other people's writing. No training we could manage could transform these people.

So one change that came out of my visits was to start a different recruiting system. Instead of targeting students with our call for candidates, I targeted the English faculty. I asked each of them to nominate no more than two or three students whom they deemed to be their very best writers, who were also outstanding listeners and good at collaborative work– people whom they felt were naturals. I also asked the tutors (as they were called then) to nominate people, because they have a pretty accurate sense of who would be good. I then contacted the nominees personally and invited them in for interviews, putting special pressure on those who had been nominated by more than one instructor. Interestingly, I ended up with the same number of new candidates as before, but on the whole much stronger ones. And as a bonus, the center's relations with the English faculty have improved. One clear sign is that each semester more faculty respond to the call for nominations. As our writing-across-the-curriculum program gradually gains momentum, I've begun to solicit nominees from instructors of writing-intensive courses as well. We even have some hope of getting them internship credit in their majors.

I continue to read about writing centers

with much more elaborate screening procedures, where prospective tutors answer searching interview questions, role-play, and respond to sample student papers. I believe these procedures are excellent. But the places I visited, on the whole, don't do anything so elaborate, and the calibre of tutors they hire seems as high as anywhere else.

Our system is frankly rather elitist, but it works for us. The writing assistants who are secondary education majors sometimes tell me they think everyone who's going to teach should work in the writing center, for the experience. I agree it would be good for them, but I am not willing to compromise the interests of the writing center by giving up the right to choose only the best people. (Probably another contrary lurks here that we need to think through some more.)

The quality of the writing assistants brings me to my fourth reflection, which is a question: how much should the director supervise what goes on in the writing center? To what extent should the writing assistants be regarded as learners, needing frequent overseeing, or as near-professionals, left mostly on their own? On my visits I saw the whole possible range, from minimal or no supervision to nearly constant supervision.

What was more surprising, I couldn't tell that the amount of supervision makes much difference in the quality of the tutoring, but I don't know for sure. As a director I am constantly wondering if I'm breathing down my writing assistants' necks too much or benignly neglecting them too much. For a long time I thought this was just my problem, but some other directors I talked with expressed similar concerns. I don't have any insights to offer at this point, but it seems to me that this question of management is difficult and needs further study, especially since most of us have so little time to be administrators. We not only direct writing centers but also teach three or four classes, serve on committees, consult with other faculty on writing matters, and struggle to get our own writing done as well. Some directors' offices aren't even in the same building with the writing center. One hunch I have about management is that the less the supervision, the more the assistants must work together to establish and maintain professional standards. I saw this principle work especially well at Pacific Lutheran University.

Finally, there is community. I learned something about community the first semester BSU offered a tutoring course, right after my sabbatical. The course was intended to reduce my teaching load by replacing the weekly staff meetings for the semester. The tutors, especially the carryovers from the previous year, were unhappy with the suspension of the meetings. They felt out of touch; they felt they had lost their voice in the operation of the center. They were relieved when the weekly meetings resumed in the spring. We are not a huge operation; in total we have between twelve and fifteen writing assistants each semester. But some of them never see each other except at the weekly meetings. They feel a strong need for a sense of community with one another. Some of the writing centers I visited have weekly staff meetings in the fall and taper off in the spring to every other week or once a month. For some centers, especially in the smaller colleges, this may work. But for us, the weekly meetings have to continue through the year. It's important for us to gather regularly as a community of writers and writing assistants. There is no shortage of topics to meet about, especially when the writing assistants are tapped to give presentations.

I also try to make the staff into a writing community by encouraging them to consult with each other about their own writing. I bring my drafts to them for help.And I am most pleased when they bring drafts to me and give me the chance to be a writing assistant, too.

Community goes beyond the walls of the individual writing center, and this is perhaps the most important thing I've learned. It's essential to break down the barriers of isolation between one writing center and another. Geographical isolation, in the West, contributes to the problem. In Boise we sometime joke that we're centrally located—a long way from everywhere. We have to drive seven hours to Salt Lake, eight to Portland, nine to Spokane or Seattle. Even if we want to visit our sister four-year colleges in Idaho, the drives take four, six, and seven hours. The nearest writing center is three hours away, at Eastern Oregon State College. The main motive for my sabbatical visits was to do something so I could stop feeling alone (though I didn't put that on the sabbatical application). Resource materials like the *Writing Center Journal* and the *Writing Lab Newsletter* helped; conferences helped. But I wanted to actually know some other

directors, to get a feel for what it was like to be in their places, to see from the inside how other centers operate day to day. And that proved to be the greatest benefit of my visits. I now know that we at BSU are not alone; we're in good company. Our problems are not much different from anyone else's. In spite of problems, what we're doing is basically good. What has pleased me even more is that my visits to other writing centers have been a catalyst for bringing other Northwest writing center people together. Some of them have begun visiting each other's centers, exchanging ideas, and drawing moral support and strength from each other.

I am indebted to the more than forty writing center directors, composition coordinators, writing-across-the-curriculum coordinators, and dozens of tutors, who generously gave up an hour, sometimes two, sometimes more, out of their crowded schedules to talk with me and even invite me to their staff meetings. I have urged them all to visit our writing center at Boise State and the other thriving centers in Idaho. Unfortunately, we in the Inland Northwest have a hard time persuading our friends on the coast, just one state away, to venture out across the desert. I saw a post card in a Portland shop that said, "When Oregonians make that big trip back east, they go to Boise, Idaho." From our point of view, that's not much of an exaggeration. But I still hope some of them will do it. And I hope I may have persuaded some of you that actually being in other people's writing centers is more stimulating and renewing than any number of conferences or journals or newsletters, good as all those things are. I urge you to get yourself invited to some other writing centers and join in the continuing conversation.

Richard Leahy
Boise State University
Boise, Idaho

Note

[1]At the Tacoma meeting, by coincidence, Irene Clark said very much the same things about loosening the rigidity of the rules we operate by, even down to citing Peter Elbow's article. The ideas were very much in the air at that conference, because I heard two other presenters say essentially the same thing, and there may have been others.

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Materials Exchange Board

In the Feb. 1991 issue of this newsletter were two listings of writing lab directors who indicated a willingness to share their materials. Listed here is another director's offer. If you too will share some of your materials, please write to the newsletter editor, indicating 1) what materials you have to share, 2) what the cost will be, and 3) who the contact person is.

College: Tidewater Community College

Materials to share: *Grammar Hotline Directory* booklet of 60 services in the U.S. and Canada, *Grammar Hotline Guidelines* for institutions wishing to initiate such a service, and *Practical Punctuation Guide* with short explanations of punctuation problems.

Contact person: Donna Reiss, Writing Center/Grammar Hotline, Tidewater Community College, 1700 College Crescent, Virginia Beach, VA 23456 (804-427-7170)

Cost: For each directory or punctuation guide, a self-addressed, stamped, business-letter-size (#10) envelope with first class postage; for guidelines, stamped, self-addressed 9-by-12-inch manila envelope with $.52 postage.

Guest Artists Add Reverence for Writing

Between the time I completed the manuscript and published *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One*, I realized that I had omitted a very important element in my own writing center. Actually, I hadn't thought about the impact it had on the students and me. Sure, I had described a low-risk environment in which writers had ownership and respect for their own ideas, felt free to ask for and accept the constructive criticism they needed, and found a safe haven to take risks entering contests or submitting for publication. What had been missing in my description is what I have come to accept as the norm and it isn't. Our students have contact with published writers from within and outside our school community. Guest artists are not a luxury but a touch with reality that adds a reverence for both writing and writer. Yes, sometimes these ventures may be expensive, but they are possible with the help of the school district, the state council in the arts, foundations, and the dedication/commitment of individual writers and teachers. Students participate in a community of writers in a very real sense rather than a synthetic one.

During a typical school year, we have poets, a playwright, editors, and authors visit the writing center. Classes may be invited to work with the guest artists, to sit in on readings, or to participate in writing workshops or question-and-answer sessions. Copies of works by the artists are available in the writing center, and we advertise the visits in advance. We also use videotapes to familiarize the students with writers. Each year I try to videotape some of the readings of guest artists and to edit a tape for students to view. I also use the videotape of the PEN Celebration highlights and Bill Moyers' series, "The Power of the Word." When students have a touch of conversation with a writer they admire or want to read, they begin to take their own writing a little more seriously. The writer becomes much closer than the printed words, and writers who actually listen to them become much more influential than their classroom teacher (even though they may be saying the same things).

Certainly we would all like to invite Eudora Welty, Kurt Vonnegut, James Michener, or Alice Walker into our classrooms or writing centers. Through videotapes I can bring those writers into the students' lives, but the real living writers who are currently writing and publishing bring an even more immediate effect. When I asked my students to respond to our guest artists last year, they did so honestly. They complained about the ones who were more concerned about being heard than sharing their work with the students or listening to the student writers; they also said some of their peers had the same characteristics. Those experiences, however, were rare. The more common responses included the following:

> "She [Madeline Tiger, poet] gave us many ideas . . . Through her I began to start writing poetry . . . She brought feeling to some of our work."
>
> "I felt relaxed since I was dealing with people I know . . . They [Dr. Donald Warner, superintendent, and Pamela Farrell, creative writing teacher, who had a poetry dialogue] showed us how to do a proper reading . . . Really a good idea . . . It gave a good look at clustering of works to be read. Pretty organized, too."
>
> "One of my favorite workshops . . . He [Andrew Young, playwright] related to us . . . He was interesting and humorous even though I was learning . . . His help influenced my play."
>
> "I like her [Laurie Kirk, poet] style. Easy to understand . . . A welcome addition to 'Voices' [our evening readings] . . . She's a real person, easy to relate to."
>
> "Interesting, worthwhile . . . I liked his [Gary Goshgarian, author and editor] written comments. His ideas for writing were great . . . We need more time with him! It was nice of him to critique our work and then review it with us . . . He's alive! I got a lot of good ideas for improvement of my story."
>
> "Publishing a book is harder than I expected! . . . He [Ed Royal Scott, guidance counselor, who just published a book] answered all the questions I had about publishing . . . Shared interesting informa-

tion . . . Gave us the actual story."

"Very talented writer . . . It was great how he [Peter Stillman, author, poet and editor] could take an everyday thing and turn it into a work of literature that was very good . . . Good teacher of careers in writing."

"Very kind man [Herman Ward, poet] who gave us a challenging thing to do . . . he made writing haiku easier . . . I liked reading everything twice. It made me see everything with more depth."

"He's [Dylan Johnson, college student and former writing center tutor] the easiest person to relate to and work with . . . Good ideas to relieve writer's block . . . Young and had a sense of humor . . . I felt comfortable around him. Sometimes I feel a little skeptical about reading my work but not this time. He made it fun and we learned a lot."

Recommendations: More poetry and short story workshops, another playwright, more published authors, more readings by faculty members.

How do high school or college writing centers get guest artists to visit? Directors must do their research, survey the faculty and student body for published writers, and call upon friends to help. Without any funds, teachers may be able to get some writers to visit at a scheduled time to meet with students interested in writing or to invite a couple of poets to participate in shared readings. During poetry week, we offer after-school readings in the writing center for students who want to share their works with other writers or get feedback from peers. Another idea is to have a week-long focus on careers in writing, bringing in a variety of writers throughout the day. Again, teachers may get free presentations by asking companies to loan them a technical writer or an advertising writer for the day. Check the community for retired writers, also. A writing center director in Florida told me that an award-winning writer walked in to volunteer his services as a tutor in their facility!

If teachers are fortunate enough to live in a state where there is an active state council in the arts and/or a foundation committed to the arts, they may apply for grants to have artists in the schools. The Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey sponsors a New Jersey Young Playwrights Program with state and foundation funding, and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation has made a major commitment to poets in the schools and a biannual statewide poetry festival for secondary school students. The largest festival of its kind in the country, it occurs on even years. During the odd years, the foundation provides regional poetry workshops for teachers and special programs with international poets. In fact, the Dodge Foundation, one of the supporters of the Moyers' series, invited students and teachers to attend some of the readings filmed for the series.

Some of our other guest artists have been budgeted in advance and the director volunteers meals, transportation and accommodations to cut down on their expenses. Once teachers begin adding guest artists, they will have more artists than time as the word spreads; but some may be used in the writing center to work with individual students while others work with groups.

Do guest artists visiting the writing center change its philosophy or goals? No, they reinforce the importance of writing in ways that we tend to forget when we are caught up in the world of writing for grades, assessment tests, or a single audience, the teacher. Guest writers help all of us reflect upon our writing, re-vision it, and set higher goals for ourselves. A reverence for writing is something we must fit into our busy schedules somehow.

Pamela Farrell
Red Bank Regional High School
Little Silver, NJ

A Reader's Comment

Issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* continue to enlighten me, and I look forward to receiving my copy each month. The article "Minimalist Tutoring: Make the Student Do All the Work" by Jeff Brooks in the February 1991 issue is especially thought-provoking and will surely stimulate intense discussion at our staff meeting.

Willa Wolcott
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida

Tutors' Column

Tutoring: The Antidote to the Closed Mind

Tutoring. For most people it is merely a process involving one person helping another to learn something new or improve upon something already known. Having been a tutor for the past semester, however, has shown me that this is only part of a much bigger and revealing whole; for tutoring also develops one of the most important aspects of learning: open-mindedness. Although achieving an equal level of open-mindedness between any tutor and tutee is difficult, it can be even more challenging when the tutee happens to have an ethnic or racial minority background and has not had extensive practice with Standard Written English. Before I met Michael, a Black Subject A student, I admit that I was one of the many people who often equate poor grammar with lack of intelligence. As our sessions progressed, however, I realized that while I was teaching Michael basic writing techniques, he was erasing my misconceptions.

For all new tutors, the initial tutoring session is often preceded by numerous questions and some anxiety—as I found out for myself. While I sat at a table waiting for Michael to arrive for our first meeting, I wondered what I was in for, not knowing how much or how little help his writing would require. After identifying each other, we began to get acquainted, and he told me that he had failed Subject A last semester but that he knew it was because he did not work hard enough. While I was immediately impressed with his taking full responsibility for his grade, I still found myself doubting his abilities, particularly because as we talked I noticed that he repeatedly used Black slang such as "they was" or "I is." Because of the prejudices and stereotypes which continue to thrive in our society today, some people might have immediately dismissed Michael as being unintelligent simply because he was Black and used Black slang, thereby making him academically or intellectually inadequate. I, however, discovered that I was a grammar bigot, not a racial bigot, since my basis for judging Michael was based solely on the color of his speech—not the color of his skin. I had no knowledge of the Subject A program other than the fact that it was for people who could not write at a university level, and as such I did not have much faith in someone who was taking the class for a second time. I therefore reasoned that if Michael could not speak properly, then he most certainly could not write properly or express his ideas adequately—I was destined to be proven wrong.

By the close of our second session together, I realized that Michael genuinely wanted to learn how to improve his writing. He brought with him a sheet consisting of common grammar questions that he was unsure about, such as the difference between "affect" and "effect" and when to use "who" or "whom." This preparedness instantly struck me because it demonstrated that he, more so than any of my other tutees, had a genuine concern about and respect for our time together. He wanted my help and he was willing to work with me, rather than sit back and expect automatic results. When we reviewed his papers, I saw that he had original, thought-provoking ideas but that they were clouded by grammar errors which prevented him from clearly expressing himself or receiving a passing grade. So, we started from square one and tackled the surface problems by correcting his grammar mistakes. Unlike some people, however, he was not content simply with the correct rule; he wanted to be able to apply what he had learned to his own writing so that he could prevent himself from making the same mistakes later.

After our third or fourth meeting, Michael's papers had considerably fewer grammar errors than they had when we started, and we were able to concentrate more fully on structure and content. Like many writers who have yet to gain confidence in their writing, his papers consisted mostly of simple sentences which could often be combined to form a more coherent and consistent flow. We therefore worked on constructing complex sentences that would express his ideas more clearly and concisely, and he instantly noticed the im-

provement and began to connect many of his sentences himself by simply using "and" or "because." He was beginning to express his ideas much more clearly, and realizing this, he became more involved with his writing and more excited when he recognized and corrected his own mistakes. He had now discovered what every tutor hopes his or her tutee will—that he had the power and the skill to improve his papers himself.

As the weeks passed and his writing improved, Michael even began to correct himself sometimes when he spoke. He became even more conscious of it after completing an assignment that addressed the issue of Black English and its appropriateness in society. We discussed this in depth, and he finally concluded that Black English did have its place in the home but that in society it could hinder a person's chances at success, particularly in the job market. I agreed with him that Black English should be preserved in the home, but he had a difficult time initially making me understand this since it was a foreign concept to me, but a very personal one to him. This was eye-opening for the both of us since I better understood and appreciated the importance of Black English as a cultural tie, and he further realized the importance of our sessions in helping him write in a way that was not so much better as it was more socially acceptable.

Michael's ability and desire to learn, as well as openly discuss issues of concern with me, enabled us to reach a high point in our tutor/tutee relationship. After having had quite a few meetings together, he came to our session in the tenth week with a paper for his political science course that he wanted to proofread with me. In addition to his paper being clear and concise with relatively few grammar errors, he exhibited remarkable insight into his topic, having thoroughly understood and answered the question for the assignment. After reviewing his paper we embarked on a discussion about the Presidential election, in which he brought up issues from previous elections and explained how they affected the present one. Being politically naive, I was thoroughly impressed with his knowledge of politics, but even more than that I was reminded of the fact that simply because someone needs help in writing does not mean that he or she is lacking in all academic areas. Since Michael and I only saw each other in our tutoring sessions, I discovered that I was viewing him from a limited perspective which did not take into account his expertise in fields other than writing. It was at this point that I recognized the progress that we had both made as a team and how I now saw him in a completely new light.

As a result of his hard work and a little advice and support from me along the way, Michael is now passing Subject A, and his instructor agrees with me that he has greatly improved over the course of the semester. While it is gratifying for me to see him doing well, I am even more grateful to him for what he has taught me. I now realize, more than ever before, that perfect grammar does not a genius make and that one can discover some of the most interesting and intelligent ideas by taking the time to sift through surface errors and understand a person's meaning. While I considered myself to be an open-minded person before, tutoring, especially working with people like Michael, has shown me that in life, just as in writing, there is always room for improvement. I truly feel that if others could experience what I have this semester, there would be a little less confusion among people and quite a few more open minds.

Susan Enfield
Peer Tutor
University of California-Berkeley

More Help for New or Prospective High School Writing Lab Directors

Building a Writing Center: From Idea to Identity, by Penny Frankel and Kay Severns, is an excellent guidebook for getting a writing center started at the junior high or secondary school level. Written by two high school English teachers who coordinate an NCTE Center of Excellence writing center in Deerfield, Illinois, the book answers philosophical questions and espouses sound pedagogy engineered to provide a nurturing atmosphere for encouraging self-discovery and confidence in young writers. *Building a Writing Center* answers questions about funding, setting up the space, staffing creatively, training of staff, evaluating services, and much more. To purchase the book ($9.50, postage included), order from Writing Center Consultants, 1490 West Fork, Lake Forest, Illinois 60045.

Call for Papers

Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association

October 12, 1991
Belmont, CA

Interested participants should send 150-word abstracts to the Program Chair, Marc Wolterbeek, English Department, College of Notre Dame, 1500 Ralston Avenue, Belmont, CA 94002 (415-508-3708). Due date for abstracts: June 15, 1991.

Call for Papers

South Central Writing Centers Association

Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1991
Fort Worth, TX

One-page proposals will be accepted through July 1, 1991. To submit a proposal, volunteer to chair a session, or to learn more about the conference, please contact Christina Murphy, Box 32875, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129 (817-921-7221) (FAX: 817-921-7333).

Summer Workshop and Conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators

June 10-16, 1991
Saratoga Springs, NY

The Workshop for Writing Program Administrators will be held on June 10-13 (fee: $600); the conference will be June 13-16 (fee: $250). For further information, write Louise Z. Smith, WPA Annual Conference, Department of English, U Mass/Boston, Boston, MA 02125 (617-287-6700).

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

April 6: Mid-Atlantic WCA, in Philadelphia, PA
Contact: Georgianne McVay, Writing Center, Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, Philadelphia, PA 19104

April 11-13:Southeastern WCA,in Birmingham
Contact: Loretta Cobb, Harbart Writing Center, U. of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL 35115 or David Roberts, University Writing Programs, Samford U., Birmingham, AL 35229

April 13: New England WCA, in Keene, NH.
Contact: Susan Monroe Nugent, Writing Center, Keene State College, Keene, NH 03431

April 26: North Shore Writing Centers Consortium, in Deerfield, IL
Contact: Penny Frankel, Deerfield High School, 1959 Waukegan Road, Deerfield, IL 60015

May 3-4: East Central WCA, in Highland Heights, KY.
Contact: Paul Ellis, Writing Center, No. Kentucky U., Highland Heights, KY 41076

Oct. 12: Pacific Coast WCA, in Belmont, CA
Contact: Marc Wolterbeek, English Dept., College of Notre Dame, 1500 Ralston Ave., Belmont, CA 94002

Oct. 17-19: Rocky Mountain WCA, in Tempe, AZ.
Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Ave. South, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344

Oct. 31-Nov.2: South Central WCA, in Fort Worth, TX
Contact: Christina Murphy, Box 32875, Texas Christian U., Fort Worth, TX 76129.

Creating Collaborative Writing Centers

At most major writing conferences, you can find sessions about writing centers and sessions about collaborative writing and cooperative learning. However, few sessions on writing centers make a connection between this new pedagogical emphasis and the impact it will have on the kinds of tutoring centers offer.

On the surface, this tendency not to connect writing centers and collaborative writing seems understandable for two reasons. First, the concepts of collaborative writing and cooperative learning are fairly new to the study of writing. Only in recent years have we seen conference sessions devoted to collaborative writing, and these have been generally of two types: those which offer insight into the group composing process of students and those which inform us of the ways collaborative writing occurs among professionals.

Sessions on the group composing process of students tend to confront questions of gender, authority, and control; problems of consensus and "dissensus" (John Trimbur's term); and the difficulty of evaluating groups projects. Sessions on collaborative writing in non-academic settings tend to report on case studies in business and industry; to present statistics on the frequency and type of collaboratively composed documents; and to discuss how group writing influences the corporate culture. Both types of presentations also examine the social basis for learning and knowledge acquisition and theories of social constructionism.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, the failure to connect writing centers and collaborative writing may have to do with the seeming dichotomy between the term "collaborative (i.e. group) writing" and the traditional philosophy of our centers. Historically, Gary Olson notes in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, writing centers have provided a "congenial environment for learning how to think and write...based on tutoring, chiefly *one-on-one* instruction..." (xi). Of course, much collaboration does occur within writing centers, but this collaboration tends to occur between a writing tutor and a student, i.e. a *one-on-one* collaboration. Few centers, we suspect, offer tutoring in collaborative writing for a small *group* of students composing one text together.

On the surface, these two reasons for not linking writing centers and collaborative writing seems understandable; however, we suggest greater reasons for making this connection. Three factors are influencing the kinds of writing students are being assigned and, by implication, point to enlarging the perspective on the kinds of tutoring centers offer to include small group dynamics and collaborative writing. These factors include (1) the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, (2) the collaborative writing/learning movement, and (3) the preponderance of business and professional writing courses.

In her *Writing Lab Newsletter* article titled "Empowering Ourselves: New Directions for the Nineties," Joan Mullin reports on her survey of nearly 100 college writing centers. She notes, "Of those centers who reported increased roles in academic decisions, 49% indicated expanding their role in writing across the curriculum" (11). She further explains, "According to the survey, many universities and colleges are just beginning WAC programs..." (11). As WAC programs expand at some universities and begin at still others, the numbers and kinds of collaborative writing assignments are likely to increase. Writing centers will then feel the effects of this increase; in fact, many presently are. In our preliminary analysis of a survey conducted in May 1990 of over 100 college writing/learning center personnel, we found nearly one-third of the respondents reporting an increase in the number of small, collaborative writing groups using their centers during the last five years. The single largest factor for this increase, according to those surveyed, was the WAC movement. (A complete list of survey results and their implications will appear in the *Writing Center Journal.)*

The increased emphasis on collaborative writing and learning in composition research also may cause us to consider expanding our view of the kinds of writing assistance we offer students. Research in academic environments tells us that cooperative learning, and by extension collaborative writing, increases students' self-esteem, develops racial and ethnic tolerance, encourages a more positive attitude toward school and learning, and promotes critical thinking. Thus, teachers

of composition and literature are more likely to assign group writing. Notably, in our survey, writing/learning center personnel cited the increased emphasis on collaborative (group) learning as the second largest factor for increase in the number of small groups using their centers over the past five years.

Finally, the preponderance of business, technical, and professional writing courses is the third factor that may influence the future direction of our centers. Research in non-academic settings tells us that professionals frequently write together, that they collaborate on a variety of documents from specialized reports to employee newsletters, and that professionals often suggest that writing teachers prepare their students for writing in the professions by increasing the quantity and variety of collaborative writing assignments (Ede and Lunsford). One reason for this increased emphasis on team projects in the professions may be the movement by many U.S. corporations toward a Japanese style of participatory management where employees and management work together in small groups to resolve problems and to make decisions. As a result of this shift in management style, many corporations now place greater emphasis on the collaborative writing of reports and other documents so as to reflect the thinking of all persons involved. To prepare their students to write professionally, English departments now offer a variety of business and technical writing courses, instructors assign more small group writing projects and, indeed, many departments have added undergraduate and graduate degrees in professional writing.

While we agree that providing one-on-one instruction for students is, and should continue to be, the principal function of writing centers, we suggest that the WAC movement, the collaborative writing/learning movement, and the preponderance of professional writing courses should lead center personnel to expand their support services. When we connect what has been historically a one-on-one learning situation with the increased interest in collaborative writing and cooperative learning both in business and in academics, we see the need for writing centers to offer assistance in two important areas: small group dynamics and collaborative writing instruction. In the remainder of this article, we will offer a few suggestions in each area.

First, writing specialists need to be trained in group facilitation or small group dynamics. Students who work in small groups to compose one text often encounter problems that are more a function of the difficulty of working together than of writing itself. If writing centers are to continue to be the primary source of student assistance outside the classroom, writing specialists need to understand these problems and ways to help groups resolve them. In particular tutors should be trained to identify causes of and strategies for resolving small group conflicts. In addition, tutors need to understand small group decision-making processes and should help groups develop strategies for decision-making.

Second, writing center personnel should be prepared to offer assistance with collaborative writing processes. Typically, those of us in writing centers deal with students one-on-one; therefore, we are experienced with students' individual composing processes. However, imagine what happens when several students try to merge their individual writing processes into one cohesive group composing process. Yet this merging, and the problems it causes, is exactly what writing center specialists must consider to successfully tutor a small group collaboratively composing one text.

In this article, we have shared with you but a few of the ways in which writing centers can facilitate small group dynamics and collaborative writing groups. One question that may arise in your mind is, "How can tutors best be trained in these two areas?" Our response is experiential, much like what occurred in the Bay Area Writing Project. Tutors need to understand first hand the problems that arise when a small group attempts to collaboratively compose one text. Since each of us no doubt has projects in our centers we would like to have completed, we recommend dividing tutors into small groups and assigning each group a project. While working on the project, each member could keep a journal of his/her experiences (problem encountered, solutions tried—those that worked vs. those that didn't, etc.) and their feelings about this experience. For example, in the Writing Center at Millikin University, we needed to devise a set of course objectives and procedures for a developmental class taught by our writing specialists. To create this manual, three writing specialists who previously had taught the course worked in a group. Through this

experience and through retrospectively sharing thoughts from their journals about what they learned and how they felt, these specialists gained a greater understanding of small group dynamics and collaborative writing, knowledge they are now able to apply when tutoring students in our center.

Certainly, we have just begun our investigation. By suggesting a connection between writing centers and collaborative learning/writing, we have attempted to open a window through which those in writing centers may view, and perhaps expand, support services in collaborative writing and small group dynamics. Most importantly, we hope others will pursue this question of relatedness and share their perspectives and their suggestions.

Deborah S. Bosley
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and
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Olson, Gary, Ed. *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984.

Trimbur, John. "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." *College English* 51 (1989): 602-616.

Directory Announcement

The National Writing Centers Association is compiling a national directory of elementary, secondary school, and college writing centers. To receive a copy of the directory form (which was also included in the February 1991 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*), please send your stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

Pamela B. Farrell, NWCA President
12 Essex Drive
Little Silver, New Jersey 07739

Writing Center Directors Speak

Thirteen years ago at Contra Costa College,I was assigned a three-unit course called "The Writing Class," and I was commissioned to begin a writing center. Students began finding out that there was a writing teacher who showed up three times a week in the back of the Learning Center– which itself was in the back of the Library– and started coming regularly to write and talk about writing. The following semester we met upstairs from the Learning Center and called our class The Writing Center. More students came, tutors began working, and I developed a series of "units" which allowed students to work independently. Eventually several instructors taught this course, and today about 1000 students attend our Writing Center, which has its own separate location outside the Library.

This Center developed, as I suppose most do, through trial and error. Without clearly knowing what I was doing, without much knowledge about writing theory, I let things happen, and they happened to turn out well. Now, thirteen years later, I am beginning a writing center at the College of Notre Dame, and this time I am concerned about what is working and what is not working in writing centers at other colleges and universities. To discover strengths and weaknesses of existing writing programs in the San Francisco Bay Area, I sent out a questionnaire to thirty-two colleges and universities in the area and received responses from the twenty-five schools with writing centers or labs. Twenty of these schools surveyed responded to the last item of the questionnaire: What are the strengths and weaknesses of your center? What plans, if any, do you have for improving it?

The responses are often puzzling and sometimes appear to be self-contradictory. For instance, the director of one community college writing center sees articulation with the English Department as both a strength and a weakness: "The primary strengths of our Center stem from the caliber of the staff and the on-going communication we have with composition instructors," but "our greatest weakness is the absence of consensus among the faculty regarding the function and importance of the Writing Center....We suspect that all English departments have skeptics who

distrust outsiders helping their students." Such statements must be interpreted carefully, for they reflect the complexities of real situations.

Similarly, the director at a large public university's writing center views heavy student use as both a strength and a weakness: strengths include "close ties with faculty, heavy student use, strong tutor training program, generous funding, dedicated staff and talented tutors"; weaknesses include "heavier student demand than we can meet. [We are] looking for more funding, more space and more tutors." Heavy student use is a sign of success but also a challenge. This director sees "closer association with actual courses and instructors" as an area for "future growth...in other words, get the tutors into the classrooms and into strong, positive working relationships with faculty from a variety of departments.

Several schools mention inadequate training of tutors as a problem while other colleges consider the training of tutors a great strength. A state university director says that "more trained supervision of tutors would help," and two private colleges have just begun training programs. In contrast, the major strength of another center is "the tutoring program....Tutors are required to attend a two-day pre-semester workshop, and tutor training the first semester of employment. The second semester they are required to do a special project of their choice and/or attend specific tutor training sessions or workshops. Tutors learn specific skills for fostering independent learning in their tutees."

Among the twenty colleges responding to the last item of the questionnaire, the largest number consider the individualized attention students receive and the quality of the staff to be the greatest strengths of their centers. A typical response is that of a community college director: the center's strengths are individualized, small groups; rich variety of materials; unique staffing plan (differentiated [i.e., both full-time and part-time teachers work in the Center]); excellent instructors and faculty." At another community college, the director views strengths as "individualized attention, immediate response to students' papers, varied audience (each class has 3 teachers), students' [working] at [their] own pace, [and] materials [which] evolve with attention to thinking complexity"; as for weaknesses, "some students need more structure; [they] cannot work individually." Also, there are "too many students for [the] number of teachers," although this particular college does not have a very high student/staff ratio in comparison with other schools. Ironically, colleges with extremely high student/staff ratios do not mention this situation as a problem.

There are three areas which writing center directors identify as weaknesses in their programs. One is staffing. At one community college, where staffing is "excellent," there is nonetheless a need for a "full-time assignment to the program; currently, part-timers or full-time instructors [are] assigned part of their loads [in the center] or overload assignments constitute [the] staffing pattern." Another community college, which has not been able "to hire full-time teaching assistants," faces a similar need, and at a state university "staff are inadequately compensated."

A second common weakness is location and space: one writing center director laments, the "Center is not a Center, but an isolated classroom"; another states that the center "isn't really a center– it's an office with a desk and two chairs; it is separate (geographically and politically) from peer writing tutors...it is isolated."

Finally, a third pervasive weakness is the lack of computers or the lack of adequate computer software. While some centers do offer "word processing [that] helps students prepare professional looking papers and gives [them an] opportunity for easy revision," a surprising number of centers have no computing facilities, although this shortcoming is not always considered a weakness by directors.

In our center I was fortunate to obtain a room near the English Department and near the Campus Activities Center to begin the Writing Center. Although the room is a bit small, I believe its central location has been responsible for the Writing Center's initial success, as more than 50 students enrolled in EN20: Writing Center during its first semester.

Judging from student evaluations, our greatest strength seems to be qualified tutors, yet a serious weakness is the absence of a formal tutor training program. In the future, I will initiate a training program which in certain respects is a scaled-down version of other

thorough programs. Tutors will meet with me and other instructors every two weeks; they will be responsible for reading at least one article about composition theory and informing the group about the article; they will either keep journals or write short articles themselves.

Another serious shortcoming is the limited time the Center is open. This academic year the English Department offers only two sections of EN20, so the Center is staffed a total of nine hours a week, and students complain that they are not given enough opportunity to attend the Center. Next year three sections of EN20 are scheduled, but thirteen-and-a-half hours a week are still insufficient. An ideal solution to this problem would be obtaining a large grant to increase the staffing of the Center.

A third problem, related to the limited opening hours, is a growing student/staff ratio. Until the Center becomes a full-blown operation open many hours a week, we will have to limit enrollment in EN20, being very selective in placing entering freshmen into the Center.

A final problem which our fledgling Center shares with other Bay Area centers is the unsatisfactory computing facilities. In fact the College has very good writing programs in the Computer Lab, which, unfortunately, is located on the other side of campus. Students may work in the Computer Lab on Writing Center assignments, but they are usually not assisted by an instructor or tutor. There is no easy solution to this dilemma: bringing computers into the Center is a good idea, but space is already limited; beginning a computer-assisted writing lab in the present Computer Lab is also a good notion, but the Computer Lab is not centrally located, while the present Writing Center is.

In other respects the College of Notre Dame's Writing Center is a successful operation with various strengths in terms of articulation with the English Department, highly qualified tutors, and individualized instruction. In short, this program already has strengths and weaknesses common to other centers, but at least I am better aware of successes, problems, and areas needing improvement at other colleges.

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