



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

Volume 15, Number 9

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### ....from the editor....

Many of us who are now in the process of looking for and selecting prospective tutors to fill next year's staff have favorite questions we pose in interviews. One of mine is to ask candidates for one of our peer tutor training classes why they are interested in such a class.

As I listen to students speculate about the potential rewards of tutoring, I try to hear what they envision tutoring to be. While potential tutors talk about helping others learn, about enhancing their own skills, or about gaining experience for their careers, the articles in this month's newsletter detail some less obvious rewards and challenges that might not immediately come to mind: reading Lafcadio Hearn, learning about fruitflies, collecting cartoons, challenging racism, and teaching learning strategies.

The pay scale for tutors may be lower than it should be, but the rewards are clearly higher than candidates for tutoring positions might anticipate.

•Muriel Harris, editor

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### The Weekly Tutor Meeting

Peer tutors at Gavilan College are students who have passed English 1A with a "B" average or better and who have been recommended by one of their instructors. Before becoming a peer tutor, each applicant must complete an open book take-home examination that covers grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and composition. During the first semester of tutoring, peer tutors are obliged to sign up for Guidance 28, "Tutoring Techniques" (a one-credit-hour course). Later, if they wish to tutor for credit in lieu of pay, Guidance 29, "Tutoring Laboratory" is also offered.

With such good instruction already offered in the tutoring courses and ensured by the tutor's passing English 1A, I did not want the weekly tutor meetings to be yet another classroom situation. Actually, instruction is a very small part of the teaching that goes on in liberal arts classes. With too much emphasis, instruction can quickly become indoctrination where ideology, not ideas, is discussed. Most liberal arts teachers think

of themselves as facilitators, people who provide opportunities for learning. I wanted to provide opportunities for the peer tutors to examine their own thoughts and tastes about good writing and good thinking.

Also I wanted tutors who would concentrate on global revisions instead of surface errors and who would try to draw ideas from writers instead of injecting ideas of their own. If I told tutors what to do, I could only expect them to tell writers what to do. Rather than establish a chain of command, I hoped to produce a symposium of ideas whose ripple effect would produce an outward expansion of world views. Anything new, avant garde, or theoretical was fair game. We talked about right-brain/left brain functions, discourse analysis, deconstructionalism, computer heuristics. On the other hand, I wanted to expose my tutors to a variety of writing styles, including archaic forms of writing. Smatterings of Latin, Old English, Middle English, as well as Modern English of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment found their way into our weekly junta.

The weekly meetings themselves were divided into two parts. First came a review of the past week by checking the Writing Center log, and then came the hand-out and discussion. The log served as a springboard to discuss problems, successes, and questions that might have arisen during the week. I also made entries in the log when helping students with aspects of writing that I wanted the tutors to be aware of. Therefore, when the topic came up as a log entry, I was able to discuss it without turning the meeting into a classroom. Here is a sample tutor log entry:

tutor:	date:
client:	time:
class:	
objective:	
comments:	

Once we finished discussing the entries in the tutor log, I initiated the week's discussion encapsulated on the hand-outs that I gave the tutors.

The eighteen meetings of the semester

were divided roughly into four categories: thinking, writing, reading, and tutoring. Thinking dealt mostly with the prewriting process, writing with drafting process, and reading with the proofreading process; tutoring dealt with improving the Writing Center and the tutors' effectiveness. Meetings that focused on tutoring *per se* covered a variety of activities like watching videotapes of tutoring sessions, constructing the suggestion box, and ultimately composing the peer tutor credo.

Weeks 4, 7, 8, and 14 concerned mostly prewriting. Activities ranged from "invisible writing" on the computer (with the monitor light turned down), a library hunt to familiarize tutors with using the reference room, to discussions of psychological factors in human communication.

One stimulating session was based on Noam Chomsky's theory of deep vs. surface structure as interpreted by psychologists Richard Bandler and John Grinder. Starting with the premise that personal problems are caused by people's inability to articulate their feelings, these psycholinguists use Chomsky's distinction between deep and surface structure in language to identify specific problems. Chomsky called "surface structure" the spoken word while "specific deep structure" would be any conscious forethought used in choosing

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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.

what was said. "Deep structure" is the original concept that forms the core meaning for the statement expressed. This deep structure has its roots in the individual's own life experience, which is colored by subconscious editing processes of generalization, deletion, and distortion.

An example of how one statement might be expressed in different ways to convey different messages is *passive structure*, which obscures agency so that the culprit is not revealed. The *deleted structure* gives only a bald account that discourages any dialogue while the *permuted structure* rashly places the blame on emotions. The *nominalized structure* generalizes the statement so that no specific action is mentioned. The *ambiguous structure* confuses what was hit with what hit it. The *missing reference* presents all the salient facts, but draws no connection between them while the *presupposition* rationalizes its own justification for the action. The specific application of such distinctions for tutors concerns writing that is technically proficient but weak on content. These distinctions give tutors the vocabulary for discussing ways of improving development. As Gertrude Stein's dictum indicates, there are meanings within meanings of even the simplest of thoughts.

Besides prewriting, several weekly meetings (3, 6, 11, and 17) were spent discussing the drafting process. These meetings covered the three major stages of the writing process, differences between algorithms vs. heuristics as well as Nietzsche's distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses of creativity. One particularly exciting discussion for me concerned Mina Shaughnessy and Rune Lore.

Shaughnessy's great contribution to teaching writing has been her great faith in students' intellectual capacity for meaningful discourse. Whatever appearances may say on the surface of an essay, meaning and significance are at work. They wait only to be discovered. However sympathetic a reader Shaughnessy may be, she still acknowledges the practical necessity for some rules of grammar. In *Errors & Expectations*, she writes: "It is not so much the ultimate logic of these regularities that makes them obligatory but rather the fact that, logical or no, they have become habitual to those who communicate within that code" (12). To illustrate her point, I used runes and the Ogman alphabet as examples of different forms

of written communication. Also Old English verses showed how fluid our language is, indicating that no one code (i.e. rule) is immutable. As Elrond in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* states, "Moon letters are rune letters, but you cannot see them . . . not when you look straight at them." Likewise, we should be patient in reading a client's writing, looking for the moon runes which lead us to the logic in student errors.

Finishing a written work was also the focus of several tutor meetings, notably meetings 12, 13, 15, and 16. Besides careful proof-reading practices, we discussed the importance of effective titles, introductions, and conclusions as well as examining sublunary worlds and the eyes of Lafcadio Hearn. Sublunary worlds are all those intermediate steps between earth-bound writers and those thoughts in flight they try to catch. Lafcadio Hearn, whose style redeemed many a mundane topic, proved to be so interesting that one tutor used the author as the topic of a research paper. Peter Huhn's discourse analysis of detective fiction especially illustrates the many layers of meanings that result in the final draft.

According to Huhn, the theme of detective fiction reflects the tacit compromise between writers and readers over determination of the text. For example, the usual plot development of a murder mystery begins with the crime whose author is analogous to the author of a text. What follows in solving the crime is reinterpreted, first by the detective who must deduce the meaning from the clues provided, then by the detective's misguided companion who misinterprets his friend's methods of investigation, and finally by the reader of the murder mystery who must see through the narrative of the companion to find the true motives of the detective in order to solve the mystery. Therefore, detective fiction provides a striking illustration of the dynamics between readers and writers where readers are capable of redefining the meaning of the text if the text is even slightly ambiguous or unclear. As Huhn states, "[as] the detective's interference thus actually modifies and shifts the meaning of the text, he himself is in turn also increasingly affected and changed by the results of his interpretive efforts."

Finally, the most time spent in the tutoring meetings was devoted to promoting effective tutoring (meetings 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, and 18). We watched videotapes like *The Tutor's*

*Guide*, we practiced computer literacy, we constructed a suggestion box, we discussed students' right to their own language, and we wrote The Peer Tutor Credo. The Peer Tutor Credo was the result of collaborative writing between the peer tutors and me. At the last tutor meeting, we reviewed the tutor log and made informal lists of general areas in which we helped clients. After that, we began to brainstorm a list of our main duties. Each tutor by turn named the thing about his work that was most important. When we got to the point in our brainstorming where we began repeating ourselves, we stopped and started to classify our details into categories. From these categories, we saw a process developing. We devised a rough outline before the end of the meeting. Then I generated a draft for the peer tutors' review. From their comments and suggestions, the final draft was written.

Throughout the semester I tried consciously to avoid the dualism of the teacher/student relationship with the peer tutors, although a clear delineation of roles existed. Nevertheless, I planned creative projects like the suggestion box which would have us all working together. Perhaps the best result of these work sessions was our collaborative writing project that became the Writing Center tutor credo. Finally, I wanted to create for the Writing Center a strong identity of people who were aware of the demands of writing, but also alive to its power and nuance. By trusting them "to kill as few patients as possible," I felt in turn they would trust clients to make the best decisions concerning the expression of their own ideas. Ultimately, I hoped student writers would pick up on the concerns of tutors in the form of a peer review, and however helpful the tutors' suggestions, the great lesson clients would learn was to trust themselves as writers.

Ed Sams  
Gavilan College  
Gilroy, CA

*Ed. note: Ed Sams has generously offered to send copies of his tutors' manual (which includes a list of resources) to anyone who asks. Write to him at the Writing Center, Gavilan College, 5055 Santa Teresa Blvd., Gilroy, CA 95020.*

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### A Reader Asks....

We have started a writing center in Tokyo at Temple University Japan. About 80 percent of our students are Japanese, and the remainder come from various countries including the United States and Canada. This must be one of the few writing centers that caters primarily to non-native speakers of English. The students using our center are taking a variety of courses in English. Since we follow the same guidelines as Temple University in Philadelphia, our students need to pass writing tests, to enroll in composition courses, and to take courses designated as writing courses as part of the implementation of the writing-across-the-curriculum program.

The writing center has been in operation for a term, during which time we saw about 250 students. Most of our time was spent going over students' papers. We would like to expand our activities to include mini-lessons, computer-instructed materials, seminars, and remedial tutoring. We would appreciate any advice from colleagues who have been involved with writing centers.

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## Tutors and Fruitflies

What do writing center tutors and fruitflies have in common? The answer is: absolutely nothing. That is, until last spring at Clarion University when a genetics professor, through his participation in writing across the curriculum, asked our Writing Center Director if her tutors would like to become involved in the process of his genetics classes' scientific papers on fruitfly experiments.

As a means of preparation for the genetics classroom, the professor gave a one-hour lecture on basic genetics to the six participating tutors. Along with the lecture, the professor gave tutors the same guideline hand-out that he had given his students, which spelled out the objectives for the paper.

With this preparation, teams of tutors entered the genetics classroom. Except for introducing the tutors to the class and explaining our purpose, the professor left the four class sessions up to the tutors. Without the professor guiding the sessions, tutors ran into two recurring problems. One was the number of unmotivated students; the other was the tutors' feeling of inadequacy with the subject matter.

Most obviously, the number of unmotivated students indicated that students were unwilling to take seriously a term project that wasn't directed by the professor. Perhaps part of students' unwillingness was caused by the second problem of the tutor's inadequacy in the subject matter. The tutor's ability to facilitate group discussion was sometimes limited by the tutor's inability to talk intelligently about genetics.

But these problems were offset by the fact that in not having the professor to guide them, students had to become more responsible for their own learning, especially since many students knew more about their subject than the tutors did. Tutors put students into groups and required them to read their papers aloud to one another. The rationale behind reading the papers aloud was that the students would hear their papers, thereby gaining a better sense of audience through having an active audience before them.

Each group had to come to consensus

on what information was most relevant to their genetics papers. This meant that students had to defend what they had written, listen to opposing views on what information was most relevant, and then determine how to incorporate pertinent information and disregard unnecessary information. What transpired was the formation of a partnership of peers; the students were becoming a community of learners making meaning.

At the conclusion of the sessions, students were given questionnaires on which to comment on the effectiveness of the experience. Students gave every indication that they learned more about both genetics and writing than they had anticipated. Even one student who responded negatively stated that writing did nothing except, "help me to organize my information and that, in turn, made it easier to understand." This comment indicates that in some instances students did not perceive writing as a mode of learning in the way they do lectures or experiments. Yet the comment shows that by organizing their knowledge through writing, students came to know their subject better.

Perhaps some students did not perceive writing as a mode of learning because the process was not directly controlled by the professor. What some students perceived as a lack of professorial direction was caused simply by the professor's absence. Students had to be prepared to adjust to this new classroom dynamic. Some students were able to adjust quickly, while others took longer. In future collaborative settings, students need to know from the start the pedagogy involved in this type of experience. Therefore, they can see that the professor's absence is not an attempt to abandon his students, but rather an attempt to empower them.

One of our tutors suggested having the professor present for all four sessions which would solve the two problems the tutors faced, especially the lack of genetics knowledge. Yet in doing so, all authority is right back with the professor. A student is much more apt to ask questions of the biology professor who knows the answers than a tutor who can only prompt students to find their own answers. Enabling students to build community with their peers is



one way tutors helped students find these answers.

That is why the tutors' lack of biology knowledge was not a crucial factor in the experience. Tutors were still able to ask pertinent questions of students' texts because they read as general readers, looking for meaning and clarity. Most importantly, tutors, through having students read aloud, decide on pertinent information, and share their papers with an active audience, showed students the processes writers go through to write a good paper. Just as the fruitfly experiments were the students' initiation into genetics, the scientific papers were their initiation into writing. What students learn about writing in this experience will benefit them in writing future papers in all disciplines.

Thus, tutors were able to demonstrate the role of writing in disciplines other than English which also helped expand the students' view of the writing center's role on campus. Through this experience, tutors are no longer perceived as simply those people who can proofread your English paper. Students saw that tutors served other disciplines and did much more than check grammar and spelling.

This semester the genetics professor is experimenting by giving his class three short papers instead of one long paper. And he is still utilizing tutors in the writing center to help his students write more effectively. So to reiterate my original question: What do tutors and fruitflies have in common? The answer is still nothing. But more importantly, tutors and fruitflies don't have to have anything in common.

James P. Murphy  
Clarion University  
Clarion, PA

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### ***A Tip for Tutors***

Seeing errors in S/V agreement in students' papers, many tutors pull out the rules and/or exercises for S/V agreement. A better approach is first to ask the student to underline the subjects and verbs in the sentence. Be ready to wait, since many students have trouble with such identification. If stu-

dents cannot identify the subjects and verbs, help them. Once they recognize the subject and verb(s), many students will automatically make the correction. If they do not, prompt them by simply asking them to think about the subject and verb(s). I have yet to meet a student who, given such a prompt (and a few seconds to think), has not been able to correct the problem without any instruction in subject/verb agreement.

Ed Vavra  
Pennsylvania College of  
Technology  
Williamsport, PA

### ***Materials Exchange Board***

The February and April issues of this year's newsletter included listings of writing lab directors who indicated a willingness to share their materials. Listed here is another director's offer. If you too are willing to 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:** Casper College

**Materials to share:** Year-End Report; samples of forms used to track information for the Year-End Report; print-out of the structure used in dBase III Plus to track information for the Year-End Report; samples of promotional materials including brochure; job descriptions; and newsletters.

**Contact person:** Helon Raines, Writing Center Coordinator or Paul Schukman, Writing Associate, Casper College-UW/CC Writing Center, 125 College Drive, Casper, WY 82601. (307-268-2610)

**Cost:** These materials are free of charge.

## New from NCTE....

(The following books are available from NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.)

*Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing* by Wendy Bishop. Stock no. 39884-0015. 233 pp., paperbound (\$15.95; NCTE members, \$12.50).

In her examination of the undergraduate creative writing workshop, Wendy Bishop (a member of our newsletter group and a former writing lab director) takes a fresh look at the traditional workshop for creative writing and suggests ways to enrich it. Bishop explains how she uses peer groups, collaboration, interviews with writers, and other approaches to help students learn to get in motion with actual writing and understand how their minds work when engaged in the creative process. An entire chapter is devoted to activities that help spark invention. In short, this is a useful resource for writing labs working with creative writing.

*Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*, by Rei R. Noguchi. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991. (127 pp., paperbound. \$8.95; NCTE members: \$6.95.)

Finally, we have a book which confronts the crucial question we continue to face: How can grammar be taught effectively? After a discussion of students' most common problems with grammar, Noguchi suggests teaching approaches centered on problem solving in writing situations. His "basics" call for teaching students to tell the difference between a sentence and a non-sentence and to spot three classes of fragments. Using operational definitions that draw on native speakers' unconscious knowledge of the English language, the author insists that students can learn to recognize modifiers and use commas appropriately without terminology such as "prepositional phrase" and "nominative absolute." Noguchi's approaches to these and other points of grammar focus on meaning and lead us beyond formal instruction in grammar. This useful book belongs on the

resource shelf in all writing labs and will serve as the source of many useful discussions among tutors.

*Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiation in Writing Workshops*, by Robert E. Brooke. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991. (166 pp., paperbound. \$14.95; NCTE members: \$10.95.)

This is a book-length argument for why writers must use writing to negotiate personal identities, "to begin to understand themselves as writers and find their voices." Brooke advocates the writer-centered workshop as an approach that "can change the way students learn, from passive absorption toward an ability to use experience to change their lives and communities."

## A Reader Comments....

Jeff Brooks' article in the February, 1991, issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* was a pleasure to read. It captured the spirit and the practice we try to maintain in the Writing Lab at the University of Akron. Many thanks to Jeff for an outstanding distillation of "minimalist tutoring"!

Susanna Horn  
University of Akron  
Akron, Ohio

## "wcenter@TTUVM1"

Lady Falls Brown, Director of the Writing Center; Ed Sears, Writing Center Assistant; and Fred Kemp, Director of Composition and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University, announce the establishment of a national bitnet distribution list devoted to a discussion of writing center practice and theory.

People who have access to bitnet and are interested in participating should send a two word message, "subscribe wcenter" to "listserv@ttuvm1." The bitnet number, for future reference, is "wcenter@ttuvm1."

## Humor in Tutorials

As teachers and tutors, we are continually adapting our techniques to make tutorials effective learning sessions. In the process, we experiment with directed dialogue, and question-and-answer formats to encourage collaborative learning. Yet, I think we have underutilized an obvious but effective teaching tool—humor.

After more than five years in the writing lab, I have found that humor has a definite place in tutorials. Granted, not all tutorials lend themselves to humor—a tutor must never laugh at a student or the ideas expressed in a serious paper, nor does a tutor become a stand-up comedienne, telling jokes or misdirecting the focus away from the writing. As we would all agree, the purpose of the session is not to entertain, but to help students become more effective writers.

Nevertheless, when used judiciously, humor can be an effective learning tool. Students often come into the lab with built-in

writing fears, and humor can sometimes help them relax. Humor that pokes fun or belittles the student would obviously be harmful, but gentle, self-directed humor can put the student at ease, which is essential if any real learning is to take place. One of my students once wrote

an essay comparing a 9mm and 10mm handgun. Nervous and more than a little frustrated, she asked me if I would go over the paper with her. After we read the essay, I asked several rather basic questions about her points of comparison. The student soon realized that I knew less-than-nothing about guns, so I made a joke about it, and together we were able to laugh at my “ignorance.” It not only broke the ice—making the session clearly give and take—it also made her aware of an important writing strategy: do not take the reader’s knowledge of the subject for granted.

Humor can also illustrate a

point, especially in grammar and punctuation, which can often seem dry to students. Make up ridiculous sentences which they will remember:



(cont. on page 10)



## Tutors' Column

How ethical is it for tutors, when faced with a student who wants to use racist or other politically or socially "incorrect" arguments in a paper, to voice their own opinions to the contrary? Should they grit their teeth and focus on helping the student express those views as clearly and in as well-organized a manner as possible, double-checking for grammatical errors? Or should they seize the opportunity to pontificate on the more socially acceptable mainline? I was faced with such a dilemma during a session with an Australian student who needed help writing a paper on racism.

The student's assignment was to assume a certain role and to write a persuasive paper from that frame of reference, aimed at a certain group. He chose to write about America's hypocrisy in claiming to be a nation of equals when racism is actually an inherent part of the social structure. The paper was written from the perspective of a foreign visitor and addressed to a group of white middle-to upper-class males.

In an effort to help him solidify his argument, I took the role of a member of his intended audience and asked him how he justified the plight of Australian aborigines who were removed from their lands and discriminated against in other ways. Ironically, he replied that they were "the same thing as the American Indians"—lazy, alcoholic, and unemployed. When I asked if they were looked down upon by the dominant culture, he replied that "if they were like everybody else, people would respect them, but they rebel, they don't care; it's like they want to be put down." I was kind of shocked, and I asked him how he reconciled such beliefs with the paper he was trying to write. He said that they were two different situations with different backgrounds.

There are a lot different ways to handle a situation like this. One way would be to take the non-confrontational approach, ignoring the incident and forging ahead on the specific topic of the paper. Sure, it avoids a scene and focuses energy on the superficial problem at

hand: getting that paper ready to hand in. This approach is similar to the perspective the ACLU takes in defending the free speech right of racist groups—the job is distasteful, but there is a recognition that people are free to voice their own beliefs. It seems to be that in this case, however, the student's attitude, at best a sign of woeful ignorance about his own culture, might have hindered the full appreciation of his topic. I felt that it would have been odd for him to condemn one society for its hypocritical stance on racism when he appeared to have similar opinions, but I also felt uncomfortable telling him that he was being racist.

I chose to treat the offending remarks as products of cultural ignorance. Going back to the student's original analogy comparing the situations of Australian aborigines and native Americans, I told him that the current plight of the Indians is the culmination of centuries of exploitation and genocide at the hands of white people and asked if he saw a similar situation in white settlers' treatment of the aborigines. He admitted that there are controversies over land ownership, but seemed reluctant to change his attitude.

How far does the tutor's responsibility to correct a student on moral grounds go? Do we have the right to decide what is socially and politically correct for our students to believe? The general reaction to the above situation might be yes, but what if the tutor were a chauvinist and the student wrote a paper against sexist images in advertising? By the preceding argument, the tutor would be justified in criticizing the paper based on his/her personal values. I don't feel that brandishing one's personal beliefs is an acceptable means of helping a student learn to write.

Another viable solution is to take the part of the audience for whom the paper is intended—the teacher, other students, etc. If your student is a member of the White Aryan Resistance and sees an English 1A paper as an opportunity to spout forth racist diatribe, you

can be assured that the tactic of politely assuming that the remarks are made from a relatively innocent lack of knowledge is not going to work. Point out to the student that s/he is saying things that most people find offensive, and that s/he is running the risk of alienating most of the audience. And, of course, if you, the tutor, are offended, you have every right to say so, and even in extreme cases refuse to work with the student.

Much of this may sound simplistic and obvious, but it addresses a real problem. I'm concerned about tutors using their position to force students to change their papers to satisfy the tutors' political and social morals. The examples I gave above may be extreme, but what about a student who wants to write about all the great things the Republicans have done for the economy in the past eight years, when the tutor is a diehard Socialist? Much depends on the relationship between tutor and student— if you are comfortable with each other, this type of discussion does not have to cause hard feelings on either side. The important thing to remember is to treat the incident as if the student has made an honest (if foolish) mistake and to give him/her the benefit of the doubt. This also gives the student a chance to correct a naive or ignorant statement without being attacked. If the problem turns out to be more than an easily-corrected case of ignorance, point out the effects of a racist or sexist (or any other -ist) statement on the audience. The most important thing, however, is to think when confronted with such a situation— and then not to react with self-righteous moral indignation or allow deeply held feminist (or other) beliefs to drive out calm and reason.

Anne Jessop  
Peer Tutor  
University of California-Berkeley

## Humor in Tutorials

(cont. from page 8)

"When thoroughly stewed, the patients will enjoy the prunes." Or, "While we ate the pups romped and played under our feet." Find a cartoon which deliberately uses inflated language or collect humorous examples from local newspapers. To illustrate the need for concrete language, I sometimes use a sentence written (in all seriousness) by one of my students: "Depending on certain circumstances, things should be allowed whereas if other things are evident, some other steps should be taken."

Sometimes, by using humor, we can introduce students to ideas that they might ordinarily resist, such as using gender neutral words. Try substituting "she" for "he," or throw in an occasional "it." (Use sentences of your own, however, so the student does not feel that his or her use of language is being ridiculed.) This does not make light of a serious issue, but rather uses humor to drive home the point. This technique can often heighten awareness of language, without alienating a resistant student.

It is obviously inappropriate to laugh at a student's paper or to be sarcastic about his or her ideas, but through gentle, friendly humor, we can dispel student fears and misunderstandings about writing. Through humor we can create a comfortable, non-threatening environment where students can be challenged but not demoralized. Through humor we can make students aware that writing can be fun, and funny (show them a Dave Barry article). As teachers, we should never be flippant, but we can certainly "lighten up."

Gillian Jordan  
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## Specialists vs. Generalists: Managing the Writing Center- Learning Center Connection

One mark of professionalization is specialization. If a distinguishing characteristic of a profession is mastery of a systematic body of knowledge (Greenwood), then it is reasonable to expect that a given professional will be able to master only a portion of the total body of knowledge that lies within her profession's purview. While patients are grateful for the wide-ranging diagnostic skills of the general practitioner, most depend heavily on specialists for medical counsel and care—on radiologists, allergists, gynecologists, urologists, and the like. The individual contemplating divorce will likely want to retain an attorney who specializes in marital dissolutions, just as someone struggling with a complicated form from the IRS will seek out the services of a tax accountant.

Since their inception, writing centers have struggled to attain professional status and recognition. Stephen North's 1985 *College English* article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," chronicles the general lack of respect writing centers have received over the years and concludes that, despite some apparently hopeful signs of solidification and institutionalization, the idea of a writing center is still misunderstood and the professional autonomy writing centers deserve is rarely granted. Jeanne Simpson, on the other hand, declares in her 1985 *Writing Center Journal* article that "The evidence indicates that we have achieved a kind of legitimacy: writing centers have become academically respectable programs" (35).

While North and Simpson may disagree about the professional identity of writing centers, they clearly share a desire for centers to be accorded full professional status. North states, for example, that "the first rule in our Writing Center is that we are professionals.... In return, of course, we expect equal professional courtesy" (441). Certainly this a reasonable expectation. The question is, how do we go about obtaining recognition that we are professionals? As I have indicated, one way is to convince prospective clients that we have

mastered a particular body of knowledge, to carefully define and circumscribe our particular sphere of activity. This, in fact, is the posture Simpson adopts: "I oppose the idea of incorporating writing labs into larger 'learning centers' in which tutoring for several disciplines occurs" (35). To enhance professional power, emphasize your professional distinctiveness.

The issue of establishing a professional identity affects not only writing centers, but the field of composition instruction as a whole. If composition is a legitimate discipline, argue spokespersons such as Maxine Hairston, then we should break our bonds and establish our autonomy from English departments:

I think that as rhetoricians and writing teachers we will come of age and become autonomous professionals with a discipline of our own only if we can make a psychological break with the literary critics who today dominate the profession of English studies. Until we move out from behind their shadows and no longer accept their definition of what our profession should be, we are not going to have full confidence in our own mission and our own professionalism. (273-274)

One approach, then, to gaining and maintaining professional identity is to distinguish yourself, guard your autonomy, and market your specialty. If Simpson is right that writing centers have achieved some hard-won professional legitimacy and respectability, then it seems to make sense to protect and enhance our reputation by emphasizing our autonomy. This is a *writing* center, we should be able to claim, not a "learning" or "skills" center.

I support any attempts to disassociate writing centers from "skills" centers. The center I direct used to have the "s" word in its name, and though it was dropped several years ago (over the strenuous objections, I might add, of many faculty), old-timers still habitually

refer to my domain as "the Skills Center," an appellation that always causes me to cringe. This designation is part of what North calls the "old" writing center, the one consigned to skill and drill, remediation, "basics." In contrast to the old center's product-centered emphasis is the new writing center's student-centered approach, "a pedagogy of direct intervention. Whereas in the 'old' center instruction tends to take place after or apart from writing, and tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the 'new' center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned" (439). North calls a tutor in the new writing center a "holist devoted to a participant-observer methodology" (438-439).

But while the "skills" label should be shunned, the idea of being part of a "learning center" does not seem inhospitable. If one accepts North's idea of a writing center as a place where the subject is the learner, where tutors are holists, where instruction focuses on the activity rather than the written product, then it seems to me that a marriage between a writing center and learning center is, if not made in heaven, at least a union of kindred spirits.

The message of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement is clear: writing is *not* the exclusive domain of the composition or English department. Writing teachers should be able to expect that teachers in other disciplines will assign and talk about writing because writing is a way of learning. If this is true, might it also be true that in a place where people talk about writing it makes sense to talk about other ways of learning?

### ***The RWC Experiment***

This feeling was the cautious underpinning of my decision a year ago to retain one portion of the curriculum I inherited as director of General College's Reading & Writing Center. The RWC had been home to a number of tutorial-supported independent study courses, mostly writing related, but also including one in study skills. I decided to jettison all of them because I didn't think a writing center should be in the business of offering courses. The idea of a writing center, I believed, is not to create assignments but to work with people who already have writing projects underway and

who want to talk about them. So I cancelled our course offerings.

I found, however, that I was not entirely at peace about my decision. I realized I had seen something in our old study skills course that I liked. One thing that did have to go was the name: "Effective College Study Skills" was enough to numb even the most ardent class schedule scanner. In addition, "study skills," like "skills center," connotes isolated activities, unconnected to the actual learning that ought to be going on in and out of the classroom. But the *idea* of a course in learning strategies still made sense to me, as did the idea of enlisting writing center tutors in the delivery of such a course.

I confess that I proceeded with little more than a vague sense that what I envisioned *made* sense. It has been after the fact that I have begun to marshal the theoretical support for a move that was made mostly intuitively. In this regard I have mirrored the approach of the whole peer tutoring movement, as described by Kenneth Bruffee. In the 1970s, some faculty and administrators, aware that incoming students were increasingly under-prepared for the academic demands of college and that attempts at supplemental assistance for these students were often unsuccessful, turned to a relatively new concept: peer tutoring. The approach worked. "More recently," says Bruffee, "we have begun to learn that much of this practical experience and the insights it yielded have a conceptual rationale, a theoretical dimension, that had escaped us earlier as we muddled through, trying to solve practical problems in practical ways" (4).

The practical problem we faced in General College at the University of Minnesota was that most students come to us without the learning strategies they need to succeed academically. Furthermore, the assistance available to such students is not helpful for many of them. Traditional ways of delivering "study skills" are not well suited for many of the students we see.

### ***GC 1043***

My practical solution to these problems was GC 1043, Learning Strategies: Reading & Study Improvement, a course offered through the General College Reading & Writing Center.

It is designed to be taken in conjunction with another college course and to provide specific, individualized instruction in learning strategies appropriate for that course. Students in 1043 are assigned a RWC tutor to work with throughout the quarter. The course consists of nine modules, which students work on in the order they choose:

- Getting started in a college course
- Surveying what you read
- Managing your time
- Using a study system
- Preparing for tests
- Taking notes from lectures
- Taking notes on and from readings
- Improving concentration and memory
- Constructing concept maps

1043 is designed to be taken concurrently with a fairly traditional subject-matter course, one that has a textbook, lectures, and exams. It is not well suited as a companion course for math, statistics, speech, literature, music, composition, or art courses. 1043 is intended for the student who is "able but untaught." The course will be of little help to students whose lack of academic success is mostly due to lack of motivation, students who know what they should do but simply do not implement what they know. We attempt to measure what prospective 1043 students already know by interviewing them and by administering a Learning Strategies Inventory. Based on this screening process, we will either admit them to the course or else suggest that 1043 would not be the best choice for them.

#### **Methods of Study Skills Delivery**

I have come to feel that 1043 provides General College students with a superior alternative to most traditional ways of delivering study skills. Those traditional deliveries are summarized below:

1. *Self-contained course.* This type of course is by design inclusive and generic. It has its own curriculum and thus could be taken by someone not taking any other coursework. A nationally-known example is *Becoming a Master Student*. (See Ellis)
2. *Supplemental Instruction.* Successful students attend class and lead group meetings. SI leaders attempt to model

effective student behaviors— note-taking, questioning, reading, etc. SI uses interactive learning strategies to promote involvement, comprehension, synthesis, and higher order reasoning skills. It demonstrates effective study techniques and special subject area applications. (See Blanc et al.; Wolfe)

3. *Paired or adjunct course.* Here a study skills course is paired with a specific content course. The study skills teacher cooperates with the content course teacher in designing her course. This approach demands some familiarity with the companion course: often the study skills teacher actually takes the companion course before designing an adjunct course. (See Dimon; Langer and Neal)
4. *Study skills workshops.* Typically these are put on by a Learning/Academic Skills Center and targeted to specific areas: note-taking, time management, previewing, etc. Usually they are one-time events with a walk-in audience. (See Reed)
5. *Counseling or "skills therapy" approach.* This approach is typically undertaken by the student services staff. An academic adviser adopts an attitudinal/behavioral emphasis toward learning strategies and focuses on psychological factors that contribute toward or impede academic success. Skills training is combined with counseling in an attempt to address student needs holistically. (See Schmelzer and Brozo)
6. *Freshman seminar.* This course provides a general orientation to college/university life. Study skills is one of several course components, including curricular requirements, registration procedures, campus resources, career planning, interpersonal skills, etc. (See Gordon and Grites; Stupka.)
7. *Independent study.* Such courses may be either textbook-based or computerized. Some use audio or video tapes as well.

#### **Weaknesses of Traditional Study Skills**

All of the traditional methods for delivering study skills have significant limitations. As-



signments generated in self-contained or independent study courses are often perceived as artificial and can too readily become ends in themselves rather than means to an end. Students need to see the immediate practicality and applicability of the study skills instruction they receive. Also, self-contained courses tend to be presumptuous in the directions they propose. A course with the flexibility to facilitate a given student's individual needs is preferable to one that either forces students into a particular mold or else presents a smorgasbord of options with the vague advice to "choose whatever works best for you."

Supplemental instruction offers student modelling of effective strategies and focused attention on specific course content. However, only students enrolled in targeted courses are served. And, like the self-contained or independent course, supplemental instruction raises the question of transferability of skills. Also, teachers or administrators wanting to call what they do "supplemental instruction" must become part of a national network and must follow fairly strict guidelines in implementing their program.

Like supplemental instruction, adjunct courses serve only students enrolled in targeted courses. Because the paired course must be modelled closely on the subject-matter course, discipline-based faculty sometimes feel threatened by adjunct courses. For their part, instructors of adjunct courses may be forced to think on their feet rather extensively if they haven't had sustained exposure to the subject matter of the companion course. And because the learning strategies introduced in an adjunct course tend to be so closely tied to the subject matter of the companion course, transferability of skills again becomes an issue.

Workshops reinforce the misleading and unproductive notion that study skills are discrete, autonomous abilities which can be acquired quite apart from what goes on in a real classroom. In addition, workshops provide no opportunity for application, follow-up, or review.

The counseling approach is an attempt to treat students as whole persons and learning problems as related to issues of personal and psychological development. However, it de-

mands a great deal of its practitioners, expecting counselors, who often have no specialized training in study skills, to be well versed in classroom learning strategies, or else learning center personnel to be knowledgeable about counseling techniques.

The freshman seminar is most effective when it focuses on the bureaucratic and interpersonal demands of college life. Adding learning strategies to an already overburdened agenda is likely to result in study skills getting lost in the shuffle. Also, this kind of course is often taught by counselors, who may not be well qualified to teach learning strategies.

Tutorial-based learning strategies instruction avoids many of the problems inherent in other methods of study skills delivery and creates its own distinctive strengths. Being simultaneously enrolled in a disciplinary course makes students' particular needs more apparent to themselves and to teachers and tutors than does the self-contained study skills course. Strategies can be applied and their effectiveness evaluated immediately. Like supplemental instruction and adjunct courses, a tutorial approach can focus on the demands of a particular course, but without being limited to as finite a portion of the total curriculum. A tutorial model provides the flexibility of independent study, but with the personalized approach and emotional support of the counseling or skills therapy method. Tutors serve as role models—experienced, successful students who know the tricks of the trade. Tutors have already received training in relational and interpersonal skills. They know how to deal with anxious, insecure, inexperienced learners. In short, of all the methods for delivering instruction in study skills, using tutors seems to be the most effective.

But should they be tutors from a writing center? In my case the answer was, "Why not?" General College did not have a learning center; we did have a writing center. If a tutorial-based program in learning strategies were to be implemented, we were the only place to do it. To the question, "Would students be well served by such a venture?" I felt compelled to answer affirmatively. To the question, "Will the RWC be well served?" I think I can, after a scant two quarters of experience with our new course, reply positively as well.

### Advantages and Disadvantages

My tutors are more versatile (and more satisfied) by virtue of their experience with 1043. Most of the writing tutoring done in our center is with walk-ins. Tutors in 1043 have appreciated the opportunity to work with a student regularly for an entire quarter. They like getting to know their tutees, and they enjoy seeing the progress a student can make over a ten-week period.

One of the most effective assignments in 1043 has been the reaction paper, in which students are asked to reflect on the experience of trying a particular strategy, for example attempting to live by a detailed schedule that plots out every hour of their lives for an entire week. They write several reaction papers during the course, and their tutors, who are already comfortable with and proficient at talking about writing, prove quite helpful.

Jeanne Simpson's fears about the dangers of diversification notwithstanding, some p.r. benefits accrue to a writing center that works with "study skills." Most faculty and advisers are overjoyed to learn that there is someplace they can send students who are unable to handle the demands of content-based courses. Students who learn about our center through 1043 also learn that we do more sustained work with writing and may be more likely to visit again for that purpose.

But teaching learning strategies through a writing center is not an unqualified blessing. We have less tutorial time available for writers than we used to. Also, I discovered that some of my assumptions about tutors' preparedness were unfounded. Even experienced, successful students, I discovered, may lack metacognitive strategies for much of what they do. Considerable training time had to be devoted to preparing tutors for their work in 1043 so that they would be able to talk about and explain what they do.

I have no easy answers to the generalist/specialist question. I must admit, however, that I like the idea that tutors in the Reading & Writing Center are perceived, and perceive themselves, as generalists. Specialization is the spirit of our age. If liberal arts education can temper that spirit, and if a college writing

center can contribute to such a temperance, then I believe we are all—tutees, tutors, teachers, administrators—well serving and well served.

Dave Healy  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, MN

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## Calendar for Writing Center Associations

May 3-4: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Highland Heights, KY.

Contact: Paul Ellis, Writing Center,  
No. Kentucky U., Highland Heights,  
KY 41076

Oct. 12: Pacific Coast Writing Centers Association, in Belmont, CA

Contact: Marc Wolterbeek, English  
Dept., College of Notre Dame, 1500  
Ralston Ave., Belmont, CA 94002

Oct. 17-19: Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association, in Tempe, AZ.

Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625  
College Ave. South, Tempe, AZ  
85282-2344

Oct. 31-Nov. 2: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Fort Worth, TX

Contact: Christina Murphy, Box  
32875, Texas Christian U., Fort  
Worth, TX 76129.

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### **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

*Muriel Harris, editor*  
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