

The **WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER**

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

Volume 16, Number 6

February, 1992

....from the editor....

What do writing labs do? How much do they do? How well do they do it? These familiar questions we regularly ask ourselves can produce some very novel and highly informative results if we seek answers in ways that the authors of this month's newsletter have done.

As you'll see in the articles in this issue, evaluating, assessing, and record keeping turn out to be probes that can lead to useful insights into what writing labs *really* do. And those insights can be the basis of yearly reports that transmit to administrators more accurate descriptions of our centers.

On page 14 you'll find some news that I've been trying to avoid—a price increase for newsletter subscriptions. You'll also find in the announcement a lot of hemming and hawing on my part, which should be some indication of how much I wanted to avoid such a measure.

•Muriel Harris, editor

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Writing Centers as Centers of Connected Learning

This year the Writing Center at Ferris State University marked its fifth anniversary as a referral center for students across the Ferris campus. Asked by my department head to give a five-year progress report, I found myself rereading a stack of quarterly reports I had filed with our dean over the past five years.

Much has changed since we first opened our door to the campus at large. The Center's staff has doubled in an effort to meet the demands of the ever-increasing number of students seeking help. The faculty in the Department of Languages and Literature has changed and grown in number and in professional training, and the Writing Center has tried to keep pace with these changes. As efforts were made to initiate writing across the curriculum, the Writing Center became a focal point for writing in all disciplines. The Center has also become an integral part of the departmental assessment efforts focusing on evaluation of stu-

dent writing, bringing together a team of faculty for developing consensus on evaluation criteria.

It is somewhat ironic that while the Center serves as a leader in evaluation and assessment of student writing and curricular outcomes, our evaluation of ourself and our achievements lacks innovation or even completeness. The reports of the past five years do not capture the essence of the unique learning environment which we have developed. The reports, filled with numbers and statistics of the number of students attending tutorials, returning for help, etc. do nothing to speak of the actual learning that takes place. The numbers do not reflect the attitudes the students express in their written evaluations of the tutors, each term praising people for "listening" and "helping" and "caring."

One trend that I did note with some irony and great pride in one of our reports was that the students continually call asking for tutors by name, perhaps a term or two after having visited the Center. Those same students come in for help and cannot remember the name of the professor they are studying with currently. Other students, labelled "at risk" by the University, who seem uncommunicative and withdrawn, will emerge at the end of a term, sometimes bearing cards and flowers, to thank the tutors who assisted them. These are the incidents that indicate to me that there is something very important going on at our writing center, something not captured by mere numbers.

In thinking about these incidents and grappling with a way of describing the essence of the learning environment of the Writing Center, I was reminded of a book I had been reading, *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Belenky, et al. The book reports on a psychological research project, begun in the late 1970s, focusing on the intellectual, ethical and psychological development of women. From in-depth interviews of 135 women from diverse settings, both academic and non-academic, the authors examine women's different perspectives on reality, truth, knowledge, and authority. Though the research focuses exclusively on women, the generalizations made concerning education were reminiscent of current composition pedagogy. In fact, the recommendations made by the authors regarding the education of women sounded like good advice for all educators of students of either gender. The very

subtitle of the book reflects the major goal of teaching writing: *The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*. It is not surprising, then, that the authors' concepts of "connected learning" and "connected teaching" seem appropriate terms for articulating that special learning that occurs at the Writing Center.

Connected learning involves active participation by the students who personalize information, making it relevant to their lives. The metaphor for the connected teacher is the midwife. Rather than a doctor, an authoritarian figure, who "delivers the baby" while the woman is removed from the experience by anesthesia, the midwife acts as a coach and empathizer, facilitating the process of birth which only the mother can complete. The tutor is just such a teacher, functioning as a concerned reader assisting students in articulating their messages but not creating the messages for students.

The very nature of the tutor's position is what at once makes it very difficult position yet a position for enhanced learning. The tutor has no authority. She is not a teacher; she does not give grades; she is often unfamiliar with the subject matter of the writing. So it is the very nature of the position that promotes the "midwife" approach as described by Belenky: "Midwife teachers focus not on their own knowledge

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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.

but on the students' knowledge" (Belenky 218). The domain of the tutor's judgment rests in the effectiveness of the students' communication. The tutor acts as a comrade, as a listener, encouraging students to say what they mean, to explain so that the tutor can understand the student's message or purpose. The midwife teacher encourages students to speak in their own voices.

The tutors are acutely aware of the vulnerability of the students who come to the Writing Center. Often students come because they fear writing, and on occasion they come because they fear their teacher; they are trying desperately to avoid further humiliation. One student writes in an evaluation, "Although I felt embarrassed about my English background, and was initially afraid to come, I feel I've benefited greatly." Another comments, "I feel less frustrated after my Writing Center appointments." I am not surprised that students have these reactions after having seen some of the bloodstained papers they bring with them. One faculty member covers the pages with so much red ink, using phrases like "this is idiotic; this is stupid; tsk,tsk; shame on your ignorance," that the tutors can barely decipher the original prose. Other students tell of faculty losing patience, slamming books, and leaving the classroom. One other faculty member has a reputation for broadcasting students' ACT scores in the classroom and pronouncing all freshmen "braindead." It comes as no surprise that students find the non-threatening atmosphere of the Writing Center a welcome change.

As Belenky notes, "The midwife teachers do not administer anesthesia. They support their students' thinking but they do not do the students' thinking for them or expect students to think as they do (Belenky 218)." The tutors support the students without giving them a sense of false confidence. They always begin a session with a positive comment, no matter how weak the writing may appear. They do not do the work for the students; they aid the students in making decisions on their own, teaching strategies, not rules, focusing on appropriateness to audience, not ultimate "rights" and "wrongs."

A colleague once commented that she thought the students liked the tutors because it was like talking to their mothers. At the time I balked at the image of the tutors as hand-holders, but after reading Belenky discuss the

qualities of "maternal thinking," I see that my colleague was right. In maternal thinking the concern is the preservation of the vulnerable child, in fostering the child's growth, focusing on the child's knowledge, not the mother's thinking (Belenky 218).

The description of the teacher as midwife begins to capture the learning environment of the Writing Center and to describe the kind of "teaching" that goes on. "Midwife teachers help students deliver their words to the world and they use their own knowledge to put the student into conversation with other voices in the culture." Part of this job as "mother/teacher" involves helping the "child/student" become acceptable within the society. The ambiguity of what is acceptable is nowhere more apparent than in the Writing Center. Tutors are constantly struggling with what is acceptable in one class and what is not acceptable in another. These differences are always couched in the terminology of audience awareness. So, while the students may be commended for insight or originality, the tutors also warn of the acceptability within a linguistic community, but because of the nature of the role as tutor, not teacher, a tutor can give this advice not as a criticism of the individual in comparison to twenty-five other students who do know how to meet the standards of the linguistic community (as defined by the individual instructor) but as an individual who too must try to fit in.

In discussing the qualities of connected learning, Belenky notes that "they" [students] need models of thinking as a human, imperfect and attainable activity." Students are offered this opportunity in the Writing Center. The tutor is that human model, unlike the authoritarian teacher who represents an unattainable goal. The tutor is just a person, imperfect and human. The tutors ask one another for advice; they share students' works with each other during sessions to get a consensus of opinion. The student sees that an intelligent adult must reconsider statements, have concepts re-explained to them, use reference materials, and ask others for advice. This is what makes them real models for learning.

As we educators evaluate our schools and our curricula, frantically trying to deal with the seemingly overwhelming problems of our educational system, I hope that we will learn from what we do well. Our writing center at Ferris State University is not unique. There are

many like it across the country which undoubtedly surpass our efforts and successes. But they are seldom the focal point of the learning environment. Too many times they are seen as a last resort for troubled students. They are in a sort of limbo, staffed by part-time employees with little or no authority and, in our case, haphazardly funded. Yet, they are the places where some of the best learning takes place. They are places where people talk *with* one another, not *at* one another, places where communication is fostered, places where people

know each others' names and where people thank others for helping and caring.

Roxanne Cullen
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Big Rapids, Michigan

Work Cited

Belenky, Mary, Blythe Clencky, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies for Assessing Writing Center Effectiveness

Writing Center administrators have to respond to issues of accountability, in particular, how to assess both effectiveness of tutorial sessions in the writing center and growth in writing for those students who regularly use writing center services. Assessment instruments currently used in these areas do not necessarily answer quantitative questions asked by school administrations that fund writing centers. Thus, each writing center director must find a way to satisfy administrative concerns about the quantitative effectiveness of writing center tutorials, and a director must also satisfy her own concerns about measuring growth in writing in ways that comment on affective areas, such as changes in attitude and motivation, that are best assessed qualitatively. A set of instruments that does provide quantitative and qualitative assessments of tutorial effectiveness, combined with case study "briefs" from tutors, offers writing center directors a way of addressing administrative accountability as well as satisfying writing center program development that enhances the learning process. By eliciting descriptions of writing conferences from tutors, writing center directors gain valuable insights into the current writing process of students who visit their centers. This perspective is the one that helps writing-center directors really understand students' learning processes as they are visible during the writing conference.

At many institutions, writing center directors are accountable quantitatively, that is, they must report on how many students use the center, and how students generally evalu-

ate their experiences. These quantitative concerns can be very useful in documenting basic operations and demonstrating success, and this information can then be used to request staff and funding. We have been using an evaluation form that incorporates these two kinds of questions and that provides material for both informal conversations among writing center staff about tutorial sessions as well as topics for discussion at our weekly staff meetings. Because evaluation and data collection is so crucial to writing center research, reports, and development, we feel justified in asking tutors and students to take two or three minutes after each session to complete these forms. And the "assessment" break between tutorials gives tutors a chance to catch their breath before going on to the next task. Also, the review process involved in the evaluation provides a good opportunity for students to describe in their own language their discoveries about their writing before they leave the writing center.

Our response sheet has three sections: the first gathers simple information about the student's visit—the student's name, assignment and course, course instructor, tutor's name, and date. The second section includes two questions: "What did you work on during your tutorial session?"—a question that encourages writers to review the session and describe growth in writing in their own words—and a general evaluation question, "How helpful was this session?" with three possible responses, "very helpful," "helpful," and "little help." This second question provides a general assessment

about the student's overall perception of the tutorial, with responses that occasionally lead tutors to discuss a controversial session with other tutors or a co-director. The third section on the response sheet is a simple list of rhetorical areas that the tutor can check to identify writing elements covered during a tutorial session. We do feel it is important to keep track of how we spend our time during tutorials; it has been helpful to be able to describe the content of tutorial sessions generally in order to demonstrate, for example, that we are primarily assisting students in basic writing classes with "invention" or "development" and not predominantly in "grammar," but we are indeed providing help in "proofreading" and "punctuation" skills. Similarly, we can describe how we are generally assisting students in upper-level writing classes, and document students' positive assessments of peer tutors' competence at these levels.

The procedure for completing this form requires planning and finesse. The first section—eliciting basic facts about a writer's choice to seek assistance—provides a good starting point for tutors and writers to talk comfortably, discuss assignments, and mention expectations for a tutorial session. Immediately at the conclusion of the tutorial, the tutor must leave the writer in privacy to complete the second section that includes the two assessment questions, and then pick up the form after the student has left the writing center. When the tutor files the response sheet in the student's folder, he or she has a chance to review the student's evaluation and consider the student's perceptions while the tutorial session is still a fresh experience. It's not unusual, therefore, for tutors to approach one of the co-directors and discuss a tutorial session that received less than "very helpful" as an assessment. In most cases, a student's dissatisfied response confirms a tutor's impression that the tutorial did not go ideally, and a conversation with a co-director immediately following the tutorial helps the tutor review the tutorial process. In this way, the very basic quantitative assessment that we need for our reports opens the door for productive conversation between the tutor and co-director (and often between tutor and tutor) about the tutoring process.

Assessment and evaluation does take time in between tutorial sessions, and questions should be as brief as possible but also

provide the pertinent information for any particular writing center. We have revised our response sheet numerous times to streamline this evaluation process so that both student and tutor can complete it quickly and promptly following the tutorials. We used to ask tutors to write prose comments following a session, but this was too time consuming and not that valuable for writing center reports. Instead, if tutors feel more comments are appropriate and have time to comment at length, they can write a note at the bottom of the checklist.

These three components of assessment have been entirely adequate for our records and reports. We can provide the kind of "number count" that enables us to say, for example, 98% of the students using the writing center during fall term rated their sessions as "extremely helpful." And, we can also learn many other things about the writing process as it is enhanced through writing center services. For example, we can compare student perceptions of the content of sessions with that of the tutors, and discover ways to encourage students to push their understanding of the writing process beyond that of simply bringing their writing in for repair. Our questions also reinforce the point of the tutorial session, and subtly urge students to take control of their revision process. By comparing the writer's review of the tutorial session with the tutor's checked items, we can get a picture of the dynamics of tutoring in specific rhetorical areas. For example, we can investigate the relationship between a tutorial session focused on grammar and students' affective response to the session in general: are they more likely to rate such a session higher or lower than a session on development?

Another area for assessment includes larger research projects, such as measuring the relationship between tutorials and growth in writing. As basic writing programs become more accountable for their role in retaining "high-risk" student populations, writing-center directors need to assess students' growth in writing over a variety of interventions. At IUP, for example, we have experimented with a course that prepares students for the first developmental writing course they take. Over the past three years, I have taught summer classes of six weeks with students whose SAT Verbal scores are below 250 and whose reading levels are between seventh and tenth grade. In such a program, it is important to provide

quantitative assessments that demonstrate the success of the combined class and writing-center intervention. Additionally, it is important to really know how students are learning. For this program, I used a set of tests to cover as many aspect of learning to write as possible:

1. A pre- and post- holistically scored writing sample;
2. A pre- and post- writing sample to measure fluency (word counts during timed writing);
3. The Writing Apprehension Survey, administered pre- and post-;
4. A set of questions to tap into students' perceptions of the purposes and process of writing: "Why do people write?" "What do people do when they write?" and "How do people learn to write?" Further ways to use these questions can be found in Pat Hartwell's text, *Open to Language*, (Oxford, N.Y., 1982, Chapter One);
5. Pre- and post- scores on the Nelson-Denney reading test, comparing changes for students enrolled in both the writing workshop and college reading with students only enrolled in college reading.

This sounds like a terrible amount of testing, but in general, it is possible to integrate these tests with course material so that students do not feel that they are spending more time being tested than actually writing. These tests all provide quantitative and qualitative information that is relevant to the learning process.

Finally, I use tutors' comments on routine report forms sent to instructors (myself, in this case) to assess growth in affective areas, as well as in understanding of individual writing processes. From tutors' brief comments on these report forms, such as "Steve was hostile at first to the idea of revising, but later got excited about developing his new ideas," I learn generally about the elements of confidence, control, and effort as students discuss these factors during their tutorial sessions, and I can later follow up with tutors during our

individual conversations or in group staff meetings. Although I feel that the data I collect is useful, as an instructor, I find the tutors' perceptions far more meaningful and perceptive because they listen to the writers talk about specific writing projects and provide feedback that really helps me understand a student's place in the development of his or her writing skills. Thus, the entire process of collecting information about assessing effectiveness empowers the tutors because their role in the process is so important. These evaluation tools also allow us to focus on the writing process and still collect the required data, instead of being distracted by tests that are alienated from the purpose and content of the course and of the mission of the writing center.

Case study assessment from the tutors is what really lets me know how effective we have been in teaching writing. The other instruments provide quantitative data on areas of instructional concern, though they are less useful for actually understanding a student's unique method of progress in a course. This combination of test instruments has not been burdensome, though it requires organization to administer at the right times. However, I have found that the qualitative assessments, especially those provided by the tutors, help me collect information about growth in writing that is truly meaningful. This integrated assessment approach provides a pretty accurate picture of what is going in the writing center and allows me to demonstrate the effectiveness of my work, that of the tutors, and that of the students in a way that is consistent with current knowledge about the development of writing abilities.

Lea Masiello
Indiana University of
Pennsylvania
Indiana, PA

**Call for Papers
Rocky Mountain Writing
Centers Association**

**October 15-17, 1992
Ogden, Utah**

The Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association invites proposals for individual presentations (15 or 20 minutes) exploring topics such as planning and administering writing centers, recruiting and training tutors, tutoring with computers, tutoring in writing across the curriculum programs, tutoring ESL students, and developing materials and courseware. Other topics are welcome. Send 300-word abstracts by March 1 to M. Clare Sweeney, Ph. D., 2625 College Avenue South #5, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344.

**Call for Proposals
Midwest Writing Centers
Association Conference**

**Oct. 2-3, 1992
St. Paul, MN**

***"Talking it Out: Writing Centers
as Social Spaces"***
Keynote speaker: Steve North

For a proposal form, contact Dave Healy, General College, 240 Appleby Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455 (612-625-1541). Proposal deadline: April 15.

**Southeastern Writing
Center Association**

**April 22-25, 1992
Colonial Williamsburg**

***"Embracing Connections: The Past,
Present, and Future of Writing Centers"***

For information, contact Dr. Tom MacLennan, Director, The Writing Place, The University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403-3297.

**Calendar
for
Writing Center Associations
(WCAs)**

Feb. 14: CUNY Writing Centers Association, in Flushing, NY

Contact: John Troynaski, Writing Skills Workshop, 232 Kiely Hall, Queens College/CUNY, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY 11367-0904.

April 10-11: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Kalamazoo, MI

Contact: Siham Fares, The Writing Lab, 1044 Moore Hall, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5031

April 11: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Emmitsburg, MD

Contact: Carl Glover, Writing and Communications Program, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727.

April 11: New England Writing Centers Association, in Fall River, MA

Contact: Ron Weisberger, Bristol Community College, 777 Elsbree St., Fall River, MA 02720

April 22-25: Southeastern Writing Center Association, in Colonial Williamsburg

Contact: Tom MacLennan, The Writing Place, The University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403-3297

Oct. 2-3: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN

Contact: Dave Healy, General College, 240 Appleby Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455

Oct. 15-17: Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association, in Ogden, Utah

Contact: M. Clare Sweeney, 2625 College Avenue South #5, Tempe, AZ 85282-2344

Announcement and Call for Papers

1992 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

July 8-11, 1992
State College, PA

We invite scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing to present papers or workshops on any relevant topic—rhetorical history or theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and non-academic contexts, advanced composition, the rhetoric of science, writing across the curriculum, rhetorical criticism, writing pedagogy, computers and writing, technical and business writing, and so on. One-page proposals will be accepted through April 6, 1992.

The conference will include a special extended session on "Designing Effective Programs with Peer Tutoring and Peer Review." Possible proposal topics for this session include tutoring and writing labs.

To submit a proposal, to volunteer to chair a session, or to find out more about attending the conference, contact Davida Charney, Dept. of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802 (BITNET: IRJ at PSUVM)

Two Readers Comment.....

"We have been subscribing to the *Writing Lab Newsletter* for months now, and thoroughly enjoy each issue. The "minimalist tutoring" article [Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring," Vol. 15, No.6, pp. 1-4] has become something of a sacred text here."

Ken Smith, College Avenue
Writing Center
and
Dawn Skorczewski, Douglass
Writing Center
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ

Call for Proposals

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

Oct. 23-24, 1992
Indiana, PA

"All About Talk"

Keynote Speaker: Wendy Bishop

For this conference for peer tutors and faculty, we invite proposals for 75-minute sessions (panel discussions, workshops, roundtables, demonstrations) or 20-minute single presentations. We encourage peer tutors to submit proposals. Proposal deadline: May 1, 1992. Submit to: Lea Masiello and Ben Rafoth, English Department, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. 15705-1094 (412-357-3029).

Call for Papers

Third Annual Conference on the Teaching of Grammar (K-College)

June 18-19, 1992
Williamsport, PA

The Association of Teachers of English Grammar is seeking presentations in the following areas: textbook evaluations, classroom techniques, applied linguistics, teacher training, rhetoric and composition, reading skills, language development, and critical thinking. Presentations should be 20 minutes, with 10 minutes for discussion. Please include information on A/V or computer needs, your address, phone number, and a short summary of the presentation. Deadline for proposals: April 1, 1992. Contact: Ed Vavra, Pennsylvania College of Technology, DIF 112, One College Avenue, Williamsport, PA 17701. (717-326-3761, ext. 7736. FAX 717-327-4503)

Tutors' Column

Patience and Persistence Please

"Well, do you want to go over this paper you just got back, or talk about your next one?" I asked Jesse as our meeting began.

"The old one is the same old stuff. You know, tenses and stuff. I don't think we need to go over it."

"Okay," I responded, "Why don't we start with your next paper."

"Well, do you know anything about *Puddinhead Wilson*?" Jesse asked, his words tinged with doubt. "I have to write an essay on it, and I have no idea what to write about."

I had just started meeting with Jesse last week, so this was only our second session. He had come to the Student Learning Center looking for a miracle in the ninth week of classes. He was in search of the answers to all of his writing problems in ten words or less, and someone to perfect all of his papers. Instead, he got me.

"Actually, I've never read *Puddinhead Wilson*," I answered him.

"Oh." The disappointment I heard in his voice made me cringe. He had little confidence in me or my ability to help him, and I couldn't help but internalize those feelings and begin to doubt myself.

"Tell me a little about the book," I said—always a good place to start. As he grudgingly reported the few skimpy facts he remembered from the plot, I began to wonder about the potential success of this tutorial. What was I supposed to do with a student who couldn't even tell me the basic plot of a book?

"So what really stood out in your mind about the book? What did you like best about it?" I asked the always successful, last-resort questions. I got a blank stare in return.

Thoughts began racing through my mind. There must be something wrong with me. Why couldn't I ask the right questions? Why was I supposedly an authority on writing? What was I even doing here? In desperation, I tried again.

"Tell me about the main character. How do things get resolved in the end?"

"I think he might have committed a murder or something. I can't remember. Yah...I think..."

"Does he get punished, sent to prison?"

"I don't remember...I think it just sort of ends."

Trying to remain calm, I began explaining to Jesse, in an unthreatening way, that knowing the basic elements of the plot is essential when trying to understand and analyze a book. Minute details like the main character committing murder shouldn't be forgotten, and books don't usually "just end," I urged. He assured me that he had, indeed, read the book, but it was so long ago (last week) and you know....

As I continued to ask what felt like an eternity of basic questions, all of which seemed to go nowhere, the temptation to just give up loomed large in my mind. I felt as if our discussion was gaining no ground. Jesse kept fumbling around with the same basic nothingness, and I wasn't helping him one bit. In searching for the right questions to ask, ones I *couldn't* ask Jesse began popping into my mind. What was I supposed to do? Who did Jesse think he was, coming in here without any solid basis for us to work with? Who did I think I was? I had walked into the Student Learning Center and volunteered my time to help other students write. What made me think I was qualified to do this?

"Did you like the book?" I asked Jesse, trying not to let him hear the desperation in my voice and knowing that this would at least elicit a yes or no response.

And at some point within the next five minutes, I'm not sure exactly when or why, Jesse began to talk, and intelligent, coherent facts and ideas came out of his mouth.

"Oh yah...*now* I remember. He *does* commit murder, with a knife he stole from the twins, and he tries to blame it on them!"

Ah-hah. A miniscule detail that may be important, I think to myself, wondering how this could have possibly slipped Jesse's mind.

But soon Jesse had constructed a complete plot summary, and we began discussing some of the connections between characters, important symbols, and suggestive meanings. With each new idea we discussed, Jesse's eyes lit up, and I could practically see the cogs of his brain churning away. I finally began to hear some of those gasps of insight and see some smiles of realization. Statements of intuitive understanding began to spew from Jesse's mouth without any probing questions from me. Our bleak situation was looking much more promising.

And what if I had given up when I was so tempted to do so? What if I hadn't continued asking questions even though I felt like a complete moron when I couldn't get any answers? At some point, the right approach was taken, or the right interactive process occurred to get Jesse thinking, discussing, and analyzing. Since every person comprehends in a different manner, it is impossible to predict when or what will cause this comprehension. A tutor's job is to continue trying, probing, asking, and challenging, even if it seems futile. Patience and perseverance are essential because that one last approach is the one that will start the avalanche rolling.

I think Jesse and I both came away from that session having learned valuable lessons. By the end of the session, Jesse had filled two pages with notes of *his* ideas about *Puddinhead Wilson*. He had a good, solid basis for an essay, and most of all, a strong feeling of self-confidence.

I realized how important patience is for a tutor trying to help any student grasp new ideas. Sometimes all a student needs is someone who will listen while he gropes around with ideas out loud and who will respond with encouragement. A tutor's job is to be that person. I also came away with a real feeling of satisfaction when I heard, "God, I never thought of any of this before." Jesse stared down at his notes and proclaimed, "I'm going to write a really great paper!"

Would I ever have thought that this session would have turned out this way? Would I ever have thought the blank stare I got from Jesse's face would have turned into these sweet sounds of victory?

Whenever I feel frustrated, stuck in a rut with a student, I remember this session with Jesse and know that this feeling is somewhere around the corner. It might be a long block to reach that corner, but it is my job as a tutor to have the patience and persistence to help the student make it there...eventually.

Tammy Medress
Peer Tutor
University of California-
Berkeley

(Ed. note: This essay also appears in *When Tutor Meets Student: Experiences in Collaborative Learning*, selected by Martha Maxwell, pub. in 1990 by MM Associates, Box 2857, Kensington, MD 20891. Used by permission of Martha Maxwell.)

A Database Invades the Writing Center

One issue repeatedly confronting a writing center staff is deciding what in-house records to preserve and how to maintain them. Written records often prove attractive because they support illusions of respectability and authenticity, verifying that the work is justifiable work. Whatever records a writing center decides to maintain, the staff should understand what information is needed, why the information should be stored, who has the right to access that information, and how this work can be done with the minimum number of forms. As C. Michael Smith points out in his article "Efficiency and Insecurity: A Case Study in Form Design and Records Management," while "each writing center has to develop its own forms and systems consistent with its own needs," the cardinal principle for designing any system is to keep it "lean and trim" (121).

Because each writing center functions in a different context, with different missions and personnel fulfilling those missions, it is futile to expect that one record-keeping system could work for all programs. In our situation at Coe College, for example, we have never used a formalized referral system. Because Coe is a small college with only 80 full-time faculty, most referrals can be handled with an instructor simply calling the Writing Center Director or informally recommending to a student that she should consider visiting the Writing Center before submitting her next paper.

While we have shunned the written referral form, our Writing Center has used a variety of techniques for tracking and analyzing what we do as a writing center. A formal exploration occurs in our one-hour course, "Topics in Composition," required of all staff members. Our class assignments include a monthly journal, the submission of several written observations of consultant-student conferences, and a weekly discussion of issues that arise in our work. The Consultant Conference Form, a written summary we produce for each of our student conferences, is also available for our self-study. Except for the daily log book—used for maintaining our work schedule and recording appointments—the Consultant Conference Forms are the only documents which record what happens in our Writing Center.

Without question our operation could function without any such record-keeping system. Because Coe has no compulsory composition courses, we are not involved in assisting required freshman writing assignments where instructors need a record of what occurred in the sessions. Despite this freedom, we keep a fairly detailed record system attempting to describe what occurs in our tutoring sessions and to quantify "objectively" those descriptions. We do this for a variety of reasons.

The primary purpose for using our Consultant Conference Form is to ensure that our staff members think about various requirements and opportunities in their conferences. The form prompts the consultant to ask about the assignment, to consider what kind of paper is being attempted, and to discover from students what help they are seeking. The Consultant Conference Form also invites the consultant to think back over each session after it is finished: evaluating what the session may have meant to the student and assessing where the writing seemed to be going.

Another value of the form is in providing interested staff members with research opportunities for studying and understanding what happens within a writing center environment. The writing center scene offers a wonderful laboratory for inquiry, in addition to providing facilities for learning about writing and about how to work with people. Although our college is not primarily a research institution, the Writing Center can provide undergraduates with opportunities to conduct studies in fields as diverse as rhetoric, sociology, psychology, and education. Within the past year, nine staff members have worked on one or more research papers using information drawn from Writing Center files and our conference forms.

For the last two years we have used Consultant Conference Forms designed for capturing data that can be maintained on a database. Much of this activity has been experimental and generated out of a curiosity to learn how databases work. But we also had some practical goals. If an instructor asked which students had visited the Writing Center

and for what purposes, we wanted to have a system for efficiently producing that information. We also wanted to compare our individual and group impressions of our tutoring with the portrait that emerges after the database has crunched the various data.

The database opens an attractive avenue for strengthening our credibility with the faculty and administration. While the reputation of the Writing Center at a small college depends primarily on the grapevine, we would be foolish not to keep records that can bolster our defensive stance. Some of the research projects, for example, are written up and distributed to the faculty in biweekly "Information Sheets" from the Writing Center. These reports use data that would not be available without the conference forms. Perhaps these records are "self-defensive," reflecting the Director's tendency to paranoia, but the database can substantiate intuitions, open up new lines of thinking, raise questions about long-held assumptions, and tabulate quickly and efficiently who came and why.

As for the establishment of a database capable of analyzing our data, we initially chose Dbase III+, a leading database program currently on the market. The Writing Center had a computer science major familiar with the program, and through the college we had access to the program (which otherwise would have been prohibitively expensive for us to purchase). Using the Consultant Conference Form as a model, we constructed a database allowing for data to be entered on the screen according to the same format.

During our first year of using the database, we encountered a number of frustrations. One major problem was that our three Zenith computers in the Writing Center had neither sufficient memory (RAM) nor storage capacity for handling the size of our database. Although we had originally intended to enter data directly into the computer without using the paper forms, our dependence on a larger computer outside the Writing Center required that we continue to fill out the paper forms, waiting until later to type the data into the database. This delay also meant that we could not quickly produce documents tabulating recent Writing Center usage. Only toward the end of the school year did we obtain funding to purchase a new computer with a hard disk drive that could handle our database.

We also experienced some problems with Dbase III+. Because of the complexity of the program and the difficulty of understanding the manuals, our knowledge of the program's procedures was inadequate for the tasks we wanted done. With the exception of our one computer science major, none of us had a sufficiently skilled working knowledge of the program and its idiosyncrasies. For reasons that we never ascertained, the memo fields, used for recording the conference summaries, became unzipped and jumbled. Our only solution was to retype the memo fields, a time-consuming enterprise.

After encountering these difficulties with Dbase III+, we decided after our first year to switch to a new database program, PC-File:dB, a Jim Button Shareware program. Several factors contributed to our decision: we liked the clarity and simplicity of this program; it had an excellent manual for explaining how the program works; no longer were we dependent on a computer science major for solving all our database problems; the PC-File:dB offered simpler procedures for printing data tables, graphs, and charts; the program was capable of reading and working with files originally constructed using Dbase III+; and the shareware program costs only \$75, significantly less than the price we would have to pay for an updated version of Dbase III+.

The remainder of this paper will discuss some conferencing patterns that became evident after using the Dbase III+ and the PC-File:dB for analyzing our tutoring sessions from the fall '88 term. According to our log book we had approximately 625 student conferences from September 1 to the middle of December. Of those conferences 484 had Consultant Conference Forms entered in the database. Concerning the conferences not recorded in the database, most were either conference summaries lost when DBase III+ crashed or sessions the consultant judged inconsequential.

The first conference factor we examined was the consultant's perception of the "mode of the conference." Consultants had five choices for describing what the consultant felt was the primary mode used when conducting the conference: Conversing, Questioning, Suggesting, Directing, or Other. Most conferences combine elements from all modes, but the Writing Center Director asked the staff to identify one predominant mode for each ses-

sion. In effect, we allowed the consultants to define each category and to decide which mode best described each session.

For the 413 conferences where consultants identified one predominant mode, the distribution was as follows:

Conversing:	37% of all conferences
Questioning:	18%
Suggesting:	34%
Directing:	11%

One revelation from the data was that the consultants reported using Questioning less than we expected since our training emphasizes the role of good questioning techniques. The database results suggest that, however frequently consultants may rely on questions to guide a conference, the approach was either less appropriate or less appealing than the more informal Conversing or the more authoritative Suggesting or Directing.

Another issue explored was the relationship between what help was requested by the student and what help was then offered by the consultant. In over 80% of the conferences, the forms indicate that the conference focused on what the students wanted help with. The most notable exception to this pattern concerned requests for assistance in expanding or developing a draft (Focus 7, one of sixteen possible choices listed on the forms). While only 38 students sought this type of help (less than 10% of the total conferences), the consultants reported this to be a major focus in 62 of the conferences. Because expanding a draft requires further effort and time, few students are intentionally seeking that assistance unless they know a paper does not fulfill a minimum page requirement. This problem of undeveloped papers, however, was frequently identified by consultants, presenting a challenge as they felt obliged to move students in a direction they had not chosen.

A third area of interest in our study was in considering what patterns of conferencing emerged for specific subgroups of students. The two identifiable groups we most frequently dealt with were international students for whom English is not their native language (ESL) and students enrolled in the Reading/Writing Workshop, a course in academic reading and writing strategies that enrolls about 15% of the freshman class.

Concerning the international students, about 10% of Coe's student body is comprised of ESL students, but they were responsible for 37% of the fall conferences. The consultants, however, reported virtually no significant difference between the pattern for ESL degree-seeking students and for all other students. For example, Conversing was reported to be the dominant mode in 37% of the conferences and Directing in only 11%. The pattern was consistently within 5 percentage points of what we found for all conferences. As for the various Foci of conferences with the degree-seeking ESL students (all with TOEFL scores above 525), these sessions followed the patterns for all conferences with three exceptions. One item, previously mentioned, was that ESL students were more likely to ask for assistance with editing and proofreading their papers. They were also more likely to seek help with trimming and tightening a draft (55% of requests for assistance in this area came from ESL students). This higher-than-expected percentage may have occurred because many of these ESL students were in a freshman course that required a series of weekly papers with a maximum of two pages per paper, a requirement some of the students had some difficulty meeting.

While the ESL students reported little trouble generating ideas for their papers, a second group of students was frequently seeking and receiving help in this area. Although the Reading/Writing Workshop (RWW) students comprise 24% of our conferences for the term, 64% of the conferences dealing with Focus 2 (getting started) and 59% with Focus 3 (generating ideas) involved students from the three sections of this course. This class is comprised of students who scored in the bottom 25% on the college's writing test for incoming freshmen. The conference summaries reveal that these students often came to their conferences with either no draft or a rudimentary beginning to their paper. In many instances they were frustrated with their assignments and had problems understanding what they should be doing in their papers.

This group of freshmen also had an unusually high percentage of conferences dealing with reading problems and ways to respond to an accompanying composition assignment. Perhaps because these students encountered so many problems with their assignments—and because their instructors

expected them to come for tutoring—the consultants' conference summaries frequently indicated that the sessions did not always run smoothly. Almost 20% of the conference summaries included comments expressing the consultant's frustration over the student's unresponsiveness or absence of commitment to the task. Although we are anxious to lower the rate of unsatisfactory conferences, the database numbers reveal that we frequently get converts from students initially hostile or skeptical about using our services. In the spring term of 1989, for example, 69% of the freshmen voluntarily coming in for a conference came from the 30% of the freshmen who had instructors requiring them in the fall to have at least one conference. But we don't have universal success. The conference forms are a frequent reminder of how frustrating it can be working with uncooperative students.

After wading through these findings and the many other reams of computer printouts, we perhaps need to pause and consider what we learn from all these numbers. The major benefit of the forms and the database is that the information can help guide the training of new consultants and the retraining of the old pros. The more precise we can be in foreseeing what lies ahead, the better we can develop tutoring strategies to meet those needs. The database records are another means for challenging our assumptions and introducing angles of perception that would have otherwise been overlooked.

Let us end with an admission that the forms and database are at best mere supplements, products of gadgets that are attractive but hazardous to one's health when held too closely. Our primary business is always people struggling with words. Neither fancy forms nor a sophisticated database can impart much guidance in solving those problems. The ultimate solutions lie with the student-writers and us, working one-on-one. If the forms and database begin to block our way, let us hope we have the good sense to unplug the computers and throw the forms away.

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Work Cited

Smith, C. Michael. "Efficiency and Insecurity: A Case Study in Form Design and Records Management." In *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984, 115-122.

OH NO.... a price increase?

Those of you in the midst of coping with slashed budgets, cutbacks, and other fallout effects of these bleak recessionary times will, I hope, more readily understand the *Writing Lab Newsletter's* budget problems. Because of severe cutbacks at my institution (including a 30% reduction in our Writing Lab staff), prices for printing and other costs to produce the newsletter have been rising at an alarming rate at the same time that my department insists even more strenuously that the newsletter be a totally self-supporting operation. The newsletter can only stay in existence as long as your subscription fees pay for its costs. To do that, we now find that we have to raise the subscription price. It's either that or fold up shop.

Readers who have been part of the newsletter group over its long history probably know how I've tried to keep the price at rock bottom levels. We cut corners by asking for prepayment, not sending out free samples or author copies, and so on because I have never wanted to strain the traditionally low (or non-existent) budgets many of you have. I do regret having to up our prices—but we must.

The unpleasant news, then, is that as of April 1, subscription costs will be \$15/year for U.S. subscriptions, U.S. \$20 for Canadian friends (because those issues have to be mailed first class), and truly exorbitant rates for overseas subscriptions (U.S. \$40 for airmail). Since these rates will still only cover costs, we continue to be unable to offer student rates to all the peer tutors who are subscribers. My apologies to everyone, and I hope financial problems are less severe in your lab and at your institution.

-M. Harris, editor

A Reader Asks...

The Academic Support Center at Warner Pacific College, which I direct, is responsible for a number of tutorial courses in all subjects, including math, and I am wondering how many other schools offer this type of program and how they administer them. One course we offer is a remedial math class, and I am currently trying to integrate writing into this tutorial course more effectively.

I am hoping to possibly network with someone who administers a similar program and who may have fresh ideas or insights.

Christie Slaton
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National Writing Centers Association Special Interest Committee for Peer Tutors

I have begun to develop a bibliography of peer tutor references (Selection, Training, Evaluation) and need help. All writing center directors who hire peer tutors for your writing center and who are interested in becoming involved in a landmark committee, please contact me:

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National Writing Centers Association Special Interest Committee On Learning Disabilities

Susan Hubbuch and I are co-chairing the National Writing Centers Association Committee on Learning Disabilities. Our goal is to provide better information to the membership about working with learning disabled students in the writing center. Once we have collected an appropriate amount of useful material, we'll convey it via the *Writing Lab Newsletter* or the *Writing Center Journal*. To do that, we need your help.

1. We'd like to develop a list of computer software that is particularly helpful to students with learning disabilities. If you know of any such software, please send us the name of the software, the manufacturer, and any other pertinent information.
2. If you have ideas for working with learning disabled students using existing hardware, we'd like to have those ideas too.

Please send your thoughts and ideas to either of us.

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We look forward to hearing from you.

A Reader Comments...

I just returned from paying my own way to present a paper at the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association (RMWCA) meeting in Arizona, and it was worth the money, even though many of the presentations—both Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association and RMWCA—were not exactly news. (If I hear Bakhtin mentioned in passing one more time by people who have never actually read him and don't need to bow to him, I'll reach for my Bactine.) What was most valuable was talking to so many writing center people, most of us on the funding fringe and not entirely academically respectable. It occurred to me that we need not mimic MLA meetings. We ought to have our own format at regional conferences: three ten-minute presentations without responders (or perhaps one twenty-minute presentation), followed by roundtable discussions and focused freewriting workshops to solve our particular problems. We could then get credit from our home institutions for presenting at a conference while benefiting more widely from each other's experience.

As always, I am torn between wanting to be scholarly in the old-fashioned way (I was trained as a medievalist but am ABD) and wanting to change the model when there is a need. In my classes and in the center, I boldly adapt to students' needs, but somehow, when facing the professorial tribe, I worry about status, which most of my colleagues and I will never have in any case. Do we need to ape a model that often—at least at regional conferences (I have never been to a national conference)—seems wasteful? If you have time to answer this question, I would appreciate it. As a newcomer to conferences, I do not wish to propose a course of action that might injure what little credibility we have, especially that of the young ones with their shiny PhDs.

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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