....from the editor....

One of the pleasures of editing this newsletter, in addition to receiving your friendly letters and comments, is the opportunity to read the manuscripts that are sent in. Even when often-discussed topics recur, there are fresh insights and new twists on familiar concerns—as you will note in the articles in this month's issue.

Another pleasure of being the editor has been the opportunity to plunge into the complexities of desktop publishing in order to set up these pages. This month's issue brought special demands as I tried to include two evaluation forms and also a worksheet. It's always a challenge to tip-toe between the problems of working within space limitations and setting up forms that are visually useful for you.

A distinctly unpleasant task, however, was last month's announcement of a price increase (to $15/year), effective April 1. In a more perfect world, budgets and bottom lines would not be allowed to exist.

•Muriel Harris, editor

Evaluating Writing Center Tutors

It's never easy to evaluate those who work around us, but I think it's imperative for improvement that we all know exactly where we perform well and where our performance is less adequate. In writing centers, I have found this particularly true yet inevitably problematic. Writing centers, center directors, and tutors will all profit from regular, systematic evaluation, yet exactly how to achieve this is somewhat difficult. The problems, however, are not insurmountable.

Reasons for Conducting Evaluations

Improvement of individuals and improvement of services, of course, are the primary reasons for evaluating writing center tutors. While most center directors take great care in selecting and training tutors, it is naive to assume that all tutors start to work as competent, agreeable workers and continue that way throughout their writing center tenure. Evaluation of tutors, then, serves primarily as a formative exercise,

one which helps directors help tutors improve their efforts.

Evaluations also help to professionalize the writing center, both in the eyes of the tutors and in the eyes of administrators. Just the act of conducting personnel evaluations indicates that we take ourselves seriously. It shows that writing centers house professionals, that those professionals are working to improve, and that those professionals believe and engage in systematic exercises in self appraisal.

In addition, systematic evaluations help directors complete graduate school and future employment recommendations for tutors. Results of regular evaluations provide readily available data to call on when making recommendations, adding strength to what might otherwise appear as whimsical, unsubstantiated claims. Further, regular evaluations can show areas where tutors have worked to improve performance, and they can demonstrate to employers that tutors are used to being treated as professionals and held accountable for their continuing performance.

Finally, evaluations can be used to establish negative trends and to support our decisions when we find it necessary to replace an ineffective tutor. I do not suggest that the evaluation procedure should be over-emphasized as a summative or comparative procedure, but a tutor who regularly receives low evaluations in the same area cannot claim ignorance of her weaknesses or lack of improvement opportunity. The documentation provided by regular evaluations can prove beneficial in supporting negative staffing decisions.

Direct Observation and Evaluation Procedures

When I began trying to evaluate tutors, I thought that, ideally, the director would be able to directly observe each tutor's performance. I quickly found that such things as punctuality and dependability were readily observable. The tutor's actual interaction with clients, however, was much more problematic. If I tried to sit in during or eavesdrop on tutoring sessions, both the tutor and the client became overwhelmingly affected. All naturalness broke down, and both participants immediately began to engage in what they assumed was the "correct" way to please the director.

Having given up on direct observation, I thought that video or audio tapes might present a preferable alternative, but they, too, had their drawbacks. Even though machinery is less intrusive than human observers, I felt sure that tutoring procedures were still affected by the intrusion. Further, the physical difficulties of providing, producing, collecting, and reviewing tapes can become overwhelming. When I used this method, the time lag between tape collection, review of the taped conference, and evaluation of the conference with the tutor proved so elongated as to lose effectiveness.

Even if I could have overcome the physical difficulties of direct observation and evaluation, questions of validity still existed. Can one or two direct or taped observations accurately reflect the whole of a tutor's ability and responsibility? It seems unlikely.

Client Evaluation

Many centers rely on immediate response from writing center clients to provide summative and formative evaluations for the tutors. I, too, have tried these post-conference evaluation forms, but have found them unspecific, misdirected, and particularly subject to the client's state of mind at the time of a visit.

For example, a frantic writer, who visits

the writing center with a rapidly approaching deadline and no idea of a writing topic, is likely to give poor evaluations to any tutor who stops short of actually writing the missing paper. Further, client evaluations may appear negative when, in fact, the tutor was performing according to plan. A writer who has his request for proofreading turned down may lambast a tutor for being unreceptive to his needs, when the tutor was actually following center protocol. I further suspect that most writing center clients would be better judges of their tutoring session a day or two later, when the stress of the assignment and of the tutoring session are memories, fragments of a whole assignment process.

Indirect Evaluation

Eventually, after attempting several variations of these evaluation methods, I decided to abandon them in favor of a less specific method, one which relied on the accumulation and categorization of my impressions of the tutors at work. This impressionistic method made the evaluations more vague; it also eliminated the instructional aspects of discussing direct or indirect observations with specific tutors. The impressionistic method did, however, prove much more manageable and provided the tutors with specific areas of concern.

In trying to develop an evaluation tool, I found a wonderful model sitting on my wife's desk. Anne teaches nursing, and I discovered that the same areas she used to evaluate her nursing students were appropriate for evaluating writing center tutors. Therefore, with a little revision, I came up with a Tutor Evaluation (see page 4).

Having worked with and revised this form over several semesters, I am now relatively certain that it evaluates tutors in the areas which are most important for the continued smooth and beneficial operation of a writing center. The areas covered by the form—communication, tutoring, and professionalism—essentially comprise all aspects of a tutor's work. The form also was designed to be photocopied for future employers, with the tutor's permission, and to provide generalized information that employers might find beneficial. Such areas as "reports to work in suitable fashion" are not generally problems in the casual atmosphere of a writing center, yet those categories can accentuate the professionalism of the tutor's performance.

The nature of the form also gives the tutors precise information on areas where they need to concentrate on improvement as well as those areas where they already excel. In order to not inflate my evaluations and thereby devalue the form, I am notably stingy with my "excellent" ratings. I am also stingy with my "unsatisfactory" ratings. By judiciously using the comments section, I have found I can make infinite gradations within the satisfactory range. By delivering the evaluations in one-to-one conferences, I am able to deliver the "satisfactory" rating with appropriate levels of praise or warning, thus keeping with the formative principle of evaluations.

Peer Evaluations

Recently, I decided that the form had a few insurmountable shortcomings. For one, it placed the totality of the evaluation procedure with me, ignoring the peer relationships so important in a writing center. The tutors regularly serve as collaborators, students, and teachers with each other. In addition, they regularly work together in the trenches and observe each other in my absence. For those reasons, I have begun developing and using the Peer Tutor Evaluation Form (see page 5).

I decided on the combined numerical and anecdotal form in order to get at two different types of information. I realized that the numerical system alone had problems; the same behavior might be adequate to one rater but only fair to another. The numerical form, however, would give me information which could be readily compared from one item to another and from one person to another. The anecdotal comments, on the other hand, would not be easily compared, but they would give much more explicit information to the tutors.

I distributed this form, for the first time, in the spring of 1990. I filled in the tutors' names on the forms, and gave each tutor forms only for her regular co-workers. Everyone was evaluated by four peers, and no one was asked to complete more than four evaluations.

After receiving all the critiques, I tabulated results for each tutor onto a blank sheet. I gave each tutor her mean score for the area and the range of mean scores for that area so that she could see where she fell in the overall rankings. This was the only way the scores proved meaningful. On "Friendliness with co-

East Central University Writing Center
Tutor Evaluation

Student _____ Date _____
Evaluator _____

Rating system: E=Excellent   S=Satisfactory   U=Unsatisfactory   N=Not evaluated

Communication

_____ 1. Directs conversation to elicit information.
_____ 2. Keeps teacher-talk to a minimum.
_____ 3. Works collaboratively with clients and co-workers.
_____ 4. Evaluates successes and failures of session.
_____ 5. Identifies barriers to learning.
_____ 6. Facilitates communication.
_____ 7. Seeks advice when unable to formulate solutions.

Tutoring implementation

_____ 1. Collects information relevant to student needs.
_____ 2. Develops appropriate plan to help students.
_____ 3. Uses knowledge of course material and writing processes to help student produce and evaluate texts.
_____ 4. Formulates goals for student's progress.
_____ 5. Develops tutoring plans which are based on improving understanding.
_____ 6. Keeps adequate records.
_____ 7. Identifies and eliminates actions that are not effective.
_____ 8. Adjusts tutoring approach when appropriate.

Professional development

_____ 1. Identifies own strengths and weaknesses.
_____ 2. Seeks guidance from appropriate personnel.
_____ 3. Becomes increasingly self-directed.
_____ 4. Takes advantage of learning opportunities.
_____ 5. Demonstrates awareness of own responsibilities and limitations.
_____ 6. Is accountable for own actions.
_____ 7. Reports for duty on time and is prepared.
_____ 8. Reports for duty in suitable fashion.
_____ 9. Respects clients as individuals.
_____ 10. Maintains confidentiality.

Summary:

Student Signature _____

Evaluator Signature _____

workers," for example, the mean scores ranged from 7.0 to 9.8; in this category, a mean score of 9.0 ranked in the middle of the group. In "Diligence toward responsibilities," on the other hand, mean scores ranged from 4.0 to 9.4; a mean score of 8.0 ranked in the top half. Thus, the evaluators were readily able to separate

two 10 rankings and two 6 scores. The first person, then, is ranked consistently by her co-workers; the second apparently displays more inconsistent behavior. This information was helpful in explaining the numbers.

I also compiled the anecdotal comments

East Central University Writing Center

Peer Tutor Evaluation Form

Please evaluate the people you regularly work with. As you complete these evaluation forms, please be as honest, careful, and constructive as you can. While the essence of these evaluations will be passed on to the tutor named below, the forms themselves will remain private to protect your objectivity.

Evaluation for _____ Year _____

Give numerical ratings for each category, using the following scale. Write additional comments in the space provided.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

excellent. . . . .superior. . . . . adequate. . . . . . fair. . . . . poor

_____ Friendliness with co-workers
_____ Friendliness with all clients
_____ Professional attitude toward job and responsibilities
_____ Knowledge of writing and the writing process
_____ Ability to help others understand and improve
_____ Diligence toward responsibilities

What are the tutor's particular strengths?

What are the tutor's improvement needs?

---

their personal friendliness with a person from their professional opinion of that person's work. Since the range of means varied so widely from question to question, it was important that the individual's means be compared to the range and not to some arbitrary standard.

I also gave each tutor the range of her rankings on each item. This also proved to be important information. In one particular situation, two tutors ended up with identical means of 8.0 on a "Friendliness with all clients." One, however, received four 8 rankings to achieve her mean and the other received

from each evaluation, dividing them into positive and constructive categories. This let the tutors see the range of comments in a collected form, thereby increasing the collective strength of the comments. This, I felt, was much more effective than handing each tutor a pile of forms to be shuffled through.

The results of the evaluation procedures were distributed in private conferences. I met with the tutors individually, explained their scores, and discussed with them their strengths and the areas where they needed improvement. Again, I did not approach the evaluations as summative or threatening, but

as ways of establishing plans for improvement and identifying areas of strength. Without exception, the tutors were eager to see their evaluations and were open and receptive to the results and their suggestions.

Conclusion

No single evaluation method perfectly blends to cover instructional, formative, and summative concerns. Further, no single method provides indisputable results. By attempting various methods, however, center directors can find the combination that is at once manageable and beneficial. No matter the method, however, the need remains constant.

Kevin Davis
East Central University
Ada, OK

Minutes of the National Writing Centers Association Executive Board Meeting
November 23, 1991
Seattle

Board Members present: Pam Farrell, Pat Dyer, Nancy Grimm, Lois Green, Sally Fitzgerald, Jim Upton, Al DeCiccio, Gloria Martin, Diana George (ex-officio), Rosemary O'Donoghue, Susan Hubbuch, Steve Fields, Lady Falls Brown, Christina Murphy, Byron Stay, Irene Clark, Julie Neff.

Guests present: Vicki Scannell, Donna Reiss, Bonnie Sunstein, Mark Shadle.

President Pam Farrell called the meeting to order at 5:35 p.m. and welcomed new board members. The minutes of the March meeting were approved.

Nancy Grimm, executive secretary, reported that the NWCA treasury balance was $2920.03. New membership since February 1991 totaled $800; expenses totaled $1484.65. Grimm reminded members that Starter Folders for new writing centers are available from her.

Old Business
Members had a lengthy discussion concerning dues and expenses. The subscription cost for *Writing Lab Newsletter* is being increased from $10 to $15. Christina Murphy moved to raise the total cost of membership to $35, including subscriptions to both *Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter*. The $35 will be distributed as follows: $10 to NWCA; $10 to *WCJ*; $15 to *WLN*. Julie Neff seconded the motion. The motion carried. Members discussed the importance of having regionals encourage national membership.

Farrell reported that Muriel Harris had recuperated from surgery and was back at work part-time. Members should notify Harris if there are concerns regarding their subscriptions to *WLN*.

Diana George, co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal*, reported that the fall issue was in the mail and showed members the new cover design. There were problems with the print in this issue related to the printer not having the right font. This will be corrected in the next issue.

Farrell reported that the writing center directory is ready for the printers and that announcements have been sent out. Purdue was originally going to handle the printing but because they are asking for $4500 up front, members decided to investigate other printers. Julie Neff will contact the print shop at her university for estimates.

Members reported on regional meetings: Midwest Writing Centers Association had their conference in October with Diana George as keynote speaker. Byron Stay reported that the Mid-Atlantic Association plans a two-day conference in April with Stephen North as keynote speaker. The South Central Conference featured Ray Wallace as speaker at their November conference. The East Central Conference is scheduled for May with Lil Brannon as keynoter. The New England Association will gather in April with Pam Farrell conducting workshops and Anne Ruggles Gere presenting

"Talking To Myself..."
A Writing Self-Help Worksheet

The "Talking to Myself..." worksheet is another attempt by those who work in "The Write Place," the Burlington High School Communication Resource Center, to help students become more independent, competent, and confident writers and learners, and we hope the worksheet is another successful attempt to "move" the lessons we have learned in our center into all courses. Our experiences in working with students in the center and with students in our own classes have led us to believe that too many students do not complete assignments successfully because they do not take the time or have not had practice in objectively analyzing writing assignments. Too many students begin writing before fully thinking about or understanding the requirements of the assignment and/or never move beyond what Linda Flower calls "Writer Based Prose." Too many students end up literally not completing the assigned writing task and/or end up literally writing for themselves, not the specified audience.

The "Talking to Myself..." worksheet is relatively self-explanatory and can be successfully used in a number of ways, including in *creative writing* classes. However, as with most writing/writing skills, students do need practice in completing the sheet accurately, and while not all teachers who use writing (either to learn or to show learning) will be willing to

This worksheet is designed to help you better understand the writing assignments you are asked to complete. Complete the answers in *your words*. If you are not sure about some of the answers, check with the instructor who gave you the writing assignment.

A. Subject:

B. Date the paper is due:

C. 1. What is the assignment in the instructor's words?

2. What is the assignment in *my* words?

3. What is the purpose of the assignment? (Am I going to inform? Am I going to entertain? Or, am I trying to persuade?)

4. Who is the audience for this paper? (Is it the teacher only? Or, is there another specified audience?)

D. What background material(s) do I have to read/research in order to complete this assignment?

E. How long should this paper be?

F. 1. What form is the paper to be?

2. If the form is not assigned, what do I think is the best way to organize this paper for this teacher/audience?

model the successful completion of the worksheet, practice in completing the worksheet can be done in writing/language arts classes or in the writing center. Group completion of the worksheet is a most valuable method to help students understand both the specific assignment and the use/value of the worksheet. As a minimum, those who see some value in the worksheet will hopefully share the worksheet with students and will be willing to answer questions students may have about the assignment.

Asking students to complete the sheet before beginning work on major writing assignments is an effective method for teachers to double-check their understanding of the assigned task and can prevent much wasted time and effort for both students and the instructor. Asking students who visit a writing center (or who seek extra assistance) to complete the sheet before or at the beginning of a conference can be a most effective diagnostic tool and can help the tutor/teacher more readily focus on the areas of misunderstanding or confusion about the assignment.

The use of the worksheet is also valuable for instructors who use writing to learn or to show learning; awareness of the components of the sheet often helps instructors make their assignment design and assignment explanation more effective.

We hope that "Talking to Myself..." reflects what many students already do when they write, but our experiences have led us to believe that not enough students do analyze their writing tasks and too many do not write effectively for the specified audience. "Talking to Myself..." is not a cure-all, but it may be an effective complement to those instructors who ask students to write and to the students who are asked to write.

James Upton
Burlington Community High School
Burlington, Iowa

Call for Proposals

National Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference
July 23-25, 1992
Breckenridge, Colorado

"Relevant Research in the '90s: Approaches That Make Sense"

Include a title, brief description suitable for publishing in the conference program, and a 500-word abstract. Address inquiries and proposals to Margaret Whitt, Dept. of English, U. of Denver, Denver, CO 80208 (303-871-2858). Deadline for proposals: April 15, 1992.

Calendar for Writing Center Associations (WCAs)

April 10-11: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Kalamazoo, MI
  Contact: Siham Fares, The Writing Lab, 1044 Moore Hall, Western Michigan U., Kalamazoo, MI 49008.
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, U. of North Carolina, Wilmington, NC 28403.
Oct. 2-3: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in St. Paul, MN
  Contact: Dave Healy, General College, 240 Appleby Hall, U. 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.

Tutors' Column

Tutoring Anne: A Case Study

Anne was born deaf. As soon as her parents discovered her hearing impairment when she was six months old, they hired speech therapists to teach her how to talk and lip-read; learning sign language was discouraged since her parents wanted her to be socialized and educated in the hearing world. Anne attended a deaf school until the fourth grade, where she was taught to lip-read and speak while learning the basic academic subjects. She then attended public schools from the end of grammar school until the completion of high school, where she was accompanied in the classrooms by interpreters who communicated what the teachers would say by moving their lips (other students would take notes for her). Now at Wheaton College, she continues to rely on the assistance of interpreters and note-takers for her courses.

When Anne came to me for tutoring, I was amazed at how remarkably articulate she is. I soon became unaware of her handicap. I was glad that she had no difficulty reading my lips, yet I had to make sure that I maintained eye contact with her at all times. When the tutee began to feel less anxious, she explained her reason for coming to a tutor.

Enrolled in an English course with heavy and complicated reading assignments, she was not doing as well as she had hoped. She explained that she had to analyze " A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" by John Donne in a three-page paper. Frustrated that she could not understand the poem, she began to talk of dropping the course.

I began by asking what she thought the basic themes of the poem were. She said, "It's about death, about the soul, love." I reassured her that she did show an understanding of the poem since she noticed the most important themes. I recommended that she write all her ideas down so that it would be easier to write her paper later on. She began to record her thoughts in her notebook.

I then asked her what lines or stanza(s) she could not understand. She selected a couple of stanzas that caused the most difficulty. I asked her to read them aloud in order that she might better grasp their meanings. As she read each line, I noticed that she did not stress the beat as a hearing person would in reading poetry; instead, she read poetry like prose. Her inability to recognize the rhythm impeded her understanding of the underlying meaning of the poem. She told me, "All I see are the words, but I can't see the actual main idea because it [understanding the poem] depends on rhythm and the different uses of words."

Even informal uses of language such as irony, understatement, and sarcasm rely on pitch, tone, and rhythm. The deaf individual may have difficulty detecting such aspects since he does not have the aural reinforcement that depends on his acquiring knowledge through conversation or through listening to the media. In analyzing the poem, Anne could not differentiate between the words and their meanings. For instance, in the line, "Like gold to airy thinness beat," she understood what each word meant, yet she could not comprehend all the words together. "I understand 'gold' and 'thinness' since gold can be thin, but what does 'airy' and 'beat' have to do with gold?"

She was also confused by the inverted word order, for she asked, "Why is 'beat' at the end of the line? Shouldn't it be in the middle?" She is used to reading in the order of subject-verb-object. Although the hearing reader may perceive the unusual word order as a means to achieve a certain tone or feeling, Anne could not grasp a full understanding of the poem due to her method of reading works for their literal (not underlying) meanings.

She grew frustrated, saying that her deafness prevented her from understanding the poem and its important aspects like theme,

tone, and rhythm. I could not decide what strategy I could use next. I reassured her that although she might not detect the tone and rhythm, she understood the major themes. Noticing my support, she became less discouraged and wanted to continue working.

Since Anne could not recognize poetic structure, I treated the poem like a prose work. I disregarded rhythm and instead began to focus on a couple of stanzas so that she might understand their basic themes. I asked her what words caught her attention. She answered, "Compasses, soul, roam, and home." I then had her read any line that contained any of the words she selected. She read,

> As stiff twin compasses are two;
> Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth, if th'other do.

But she could not understand their meaning. I asked if she noticed comparisons between any objects. She could see that since "souls" and "compasses" were in the same stanza, they must be similar. However, she could not see any further relationship between the two or between any of the stanzas. The more detailed the analysis we attempted, the more difficult it was for her to understand the meaning of the poem, especially the poem's more complex references.

Since I was consciously aware of her hearing loss, I wondered if this realization prevented me from tutoring her as a *student* instead of as a deaf person. At first I believed that Anne's problems were caused by her handicapped condition; since she could not detect the underlying meanings of the words and the rhythm of the poem, she could not understand the literary work. However, I also realized that many students have trouble comparing objects or ideas when they interpret poems. Thus, I could not understand how I should tutor her: although I did not want her to feel as if I thought she was "stupid," I wanted to reassure her that I *did* sympathize with her about her handicap and that I was willing to give her extra help.

After we worked for about an hour, Anne wanted to stop. She thanked me and said that she did have more of an understanding of the poem and that she had several ideas she had written down that would help her on the paper. A week later I was pleasantly sur-

prised to find her in the tutoring room waiting for me. She told me that she had done well on her paper and wanted my help on her next project.

Elizabeth Faerm
Peer Tutor
Wheaton College
Norton, MA

NWCA Minutes

the address. Gabrielle Rico was the keynoter at the Pacific Coast Conference in October. Byron Stay recommended that regionals promote each others' conferences rather than be concerned about boundaries.

Special Interest Group reports: Rosemary O'Donoghue indicated that there was a poor response regarding revision of the Starter Kit. Julie Neff discussed interest in software for students with learning disabilities and referred members to a recent article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Pat Dyer indicated that there was interest in a meeting of people who are conducting writing center research.

This year's NCTE workshop is entitled "What Keeps a Writing Center Going?" and is scheduled for Tuesday. Thirty-six are registered for the session.

Farrell arranged for the Council on English Leadership to sponsor a session at NCTE entitled "Writing Centers and Their Place in the School."

Lady Falls Brown reported that the CCCC Writing Centers Special Interest Session will be "Computers in the Writing Center: Past, Present and Future." Brown also told members that the writing center computer network has been active.

Farrell has written to Writing Program Administrators regarding a liaison but has not heard a response.

New Business

Descriptions of the responsibilities of officers on the NWCA Board have been completed and were distributed to the officers.

Forms are available from Grimm for at-large

nominations to the executive board.

A committee was formed to screen applications for the graduate student scholarship. The committee includes Lady Falls Brown, Lois Green and Irene Clark. Clark will chair the committee. Scholarship applications are available from Grimm.

Pat Dyer is soliciting nominations for outstanding writing center scholarship for the year January-December 1991. Nominations for this award are due by January 20.

Rosemary O'Donoghue volunteered to chair a membership committee.

Byron Stay nominated Ray Wallace for the position of second-vice-president. The nomination was seconded by Steve Fields and carried by the board.

Julie Neff announced that the board members were invited to her home for dinner.

President Pam Farrell passed the gavel to the new president, Pat Dyer.

The meeting adjourned at 7:05.

Respectfully submitted,
Nancy Grimm
NWCA Executive Secretary

Assertive Collaboration in the Writing Center: Discovering Autonomy Through Community

The Writing Center is a greenhouse for human thought.
—Lisa Mongnobove

While some of the one-to-one, interpersonal interaction which goes on in the Writing Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) clearly is tutoring, most of what goes on is not; it is instead collaboration. To highlight the difference between tutoring and collaborating, here are definitions from the *American Heritage Dictionary:*

to tutor: "to instruct or teach privately."

to collaborate: "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort."

Simply juxtaposing these definitions may make apparent why we do not call our one-to-one work in the Writing Center "tutoring." In fact, we don't use the terms *tutor, tutee* (does anyone like this term?), *tutoring,* or *tutorials.* Instead of tutors we have *assistants* who work with *clients,* not tutees, in *conferences,* not tutorials, *conferencing* rather than tutoring.

The care we take with these terms is not some sort of semantic fastidiousness. These terms have informed our interactions over time and have contributed to an atmosphere in the

Writing Center which promotes growth of persons as writers and as persons, whether staff members or clients.

In the UALR Writing Center, when assistant and client have a conference, they are interacting in what I call *assertive collaboration.* *Assertive collaboration* is a mouthful, for sure, and I don't expect it to replace *peer tutoring* anytime soon. But while tutoring has value for both tutee and tutor, I do not think tutoring in the traditional sense is what we should be doing in the Writing Center or, in fact, what we *are* doing in one-to-one (or in small group) work. Tutoring may work well in addressing a skill deficit, but it cannot effect or even promote meaningful change in writing or, as is our goal, change in the writer. I believe that assertive collaboration can.

So why not peer tutoring?

1) To begin with, *peer tutoring* seems to me to be an oxymoron. If one is "instructing" another, at least in the traditional sense, the two are not peers: one is the instructor who has the knowledge to

give, the other the student, the one who doesn't know and waits to receive.

2) So—*tutoring*, even if we call it "peer," by its very definition cannot be an equal *interaction*. This is so because the roles ordained for each person create an inequality that might be described as "I know, and you don't know."

3) *Peer tutoring* promotes and perpetuates an attitude of minimalism. Most of us can recall many instances in which a client has presented himself/herself in the writing center with an attitude, whether explicit or implicit, of wanting a quick fix: "What is the very least I can do to fix up this paper?"

As you consider these reasons, you may think of other reasons why *peer tutoring* is too limited and limiting a term for the wonderful collaborative work which can and does go on in the Writing Center.

For the remainder of this article, I mean to set down something of assertive collaboration and how it promotes growth in persons engaged in it. As I do so, you will hear voices other than mine, including voices from our Writing Center. Also, the points I make are not discrete and (this may be seen as a cop-out) my description is not exhaustive since assertive collaboration needs to be experienced or at least observed to be understood.

To begin, let me set the scene. In our Writing Center when client and assistant put their heads together to talk about a piece of writing, the assistant sets the tone, approaching the interaction as a friendly reader, interested in the writer and in the meaning the writer is attempting to convey in the writing. He or she will talk with the writer using I-statements and questions and demonstrating, from the very first exchanges, respect for the writing. The goal of such interaction is, as Muriel Harris has put it, "to help the writer become a better writer, not to make the paper a better paper" (Adams 12). The result is growth of the persons involved.

Bearing this scene in mind, what may be said further about assertive collaboration?

1) Assertive collaboration is collaboration, a "working together...a joint effort."

In "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing," John Trimbur writes of the "importance of social interaction to learning how to write" (87). This is, of course, what the Writing Center is all about.

2) Assertive collaboration is assertive.

In coming up with the term *assertive collaboration*, I wanted an adjective to describe the nature of the collaboration. *Assertive*, as used in the current behavioral/psychological sense, means neither passive nor aggressive nor indirect. In human interactions, whereas a passive stance might mean "I'm not okay," aggressive "you're not okay," indirect "you're not okay, but I'll let you think you are," assertive means "I'm okay and you're okay, too" (Phelps and Austin 25). Similarly, in a writing conference, aggressive, which could be the stance of a tutor, might mean "You don't know." And indirect might become condescending: "You don't know, but I'll let you think you do."

Assertive means, then, that as I enter an interaction I have the confidence that I am neither more than nor less than the other—in whatever way such status might be determined, as for example on the basis of who "holds" the knowledge. Tom MacLennan has written about the importance of the nature of collaboration in his recent article "Martin Buber and a Collaborative Learning Ethos." I believe his application of Buber's "I-Thou" ideal to the work of the writing center is close to what I mean by assertive collaboration.

3) Assertive collaboration promotes equality in relationships.

Jeanette Harris and Joyce Kinkead assert that "students learn best when...they are working with an equal rather than when they are confronted by an authority figure..." (1). And Richard Behm writes the following:

> The focus in the successful writing center is on...discovering what...the learner already knows and showing a respect for the knowledge and skills learners possess as they come through the door. (9)

Donna, a Writing Center Assistant, writes of interacting with a client: "...there was no feeling of superiority or inferiority on either of our parts." In such an equal relationship, each

person knows and values his/her contribution to the interaction as well as the contribution of the other. This is in sharp contrast to—in John Trimbur's terminology—the "top-down" (89) approach of teacher to student in the traditional classroom *and* likewise of the tutor, or "little teacher" (105), to the tutee.

4) Assertive collaboration promotes discovery and clarification of meaning.

Ruby, a Writing Center client, puts it nicely: "After talking with Darryl on several of my papers, I learned to think more and deeply about the subject." I believe that assertive collaboration may promote an important attitude about knowledge, that knowledge may be constructed with other human beings rather than received from them. Trimbur quotes Edwin Mason: "...knowledge itself is a social construct, produced by collaborative activity" (93). And Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in *Women's Ways of Knowing* have described "constructed knowledge" elegantly: "All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known" (137).

I am a novice at the business of epistemology, but I believe I can assert that the construction of knowledge taking place in writing centers merits attention, more than a footnote or an afterthought, of researchers and scholars. Indeed, I believe it is time that the writing center be recognized for more than its services, many and excellent as they are, that the writing center is on many college campuses the place in which the most humane, innovative, creative—the list could go on—educational practices are being tried and adjusted every day. Yet I would guess that on very few campuses is the writing center recognized and studied as a place, perhaps *the* place, where learning theory is being developed. Further, I would guess that in very few classrooms is there anything as interesting or progressive being done by way of discovering how people learn or how knowledge is constructed as there is in the writing center.

5) Assertive collaboration promotes proactive rather than reactive learning.

Assertive collaboration is dialogue, and as Harris and Kinkead put it, "Students learn best ...when they are engaged in a dialogue rather than merely listening to someone else's monologue" (1).

In addition, in assertive collaboration there is no need for either judging or defending. Thus much growth can result in both participants in assertive collaboration. And indeed assistants learn as much as those they serve; here are some assistants' voices:

> Lisa: "I have been helped at least as much as I have helped."

> Earnest: "It also helped me to change my perception of myself."

> Kerri: "I'm no longer afraid of people reading my material and giving advice on my making it better. This fear was a real handicap for my growth as a writer."

> Leroy: "Working with different clients and their writing has also helped me to become a better listener."

> Charlesena: "My abilities to communicate and relate to other people improved immensely."

> Paige: "Finally, I come to what I think is the most important thing I received from my internship in the Writing Center, and this was learning how to ask for help myself."

> Darryl: "I sometimes feel guilty about conferencing with clients. I know I'm here to help them, and I wonder if they know how much they're helping me."

6) Assertive collaboration promotes authentic communication between authentic persons.

Ruby, a Writing Center client, commented that there was "no barrier between an assistant and a client." Tom MacLennan quotes Buber on this subject: "Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons" (7). When persons are relating as persons instead of in roles, real talking and real listening can happen. Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues discuss "real talk" in their book *Women's Ways of Knowing:*

> Constructivists make a distinction between "really talking" and what they consider to be didactic talk in which the

speaker's intention is to hold forth rather than to share ideas. In didactic talk, each participant may report experience, but there is no attempt among participants to join together to arrive at some new understanding. "Really talking" requires careful listening; it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow. (144)

When real talking and real listening take place, giving and receiving are not only possible but inevitable.

This sort of communication, in turn, promotes the development of voice, which seems to me to be crucial to the growth of writers and, of course, of persons. Again I quote from *Women's Ways of Knowing*:

It is these kinds of relationships that provide...experiences of mutuality, equality, and reciprocity that are most helpful in eventually enabling [people] to disentangle their own voices from the voices of others. It is from just such relationships that [people] seem to emerge with a powerful sense of their own capacities for knowing. (38)

7) Assertive collaboration promotes creativity, responsibility, and authority in the writer.

The culmination of these things is autonomy or freedom. Again this is in contrast to the traditional classroom experience. Trimbur quotes Paulo Friere—some pretty strong words—on this subject:

The purpose of traditional education is to teach students how to live passively within oppressive and alienating structures....Since students "receive" the world as "passive entities," traditional education is a force for domestication—not freedom. (93)

In the UALR Writing Center we believe, as Harris and Kinkead put it, that "students learn best...when they assume control of their own writing rather than being told how and what to write by a teacher" (1). One of the best things we do in our Writing Center is something we don't do—appropriate the writing from the writer. Here again are voices from the Writing Center:

Briget:
He had been talking to a number of friends who had made various suggestions. Most of these were contrary to his own initial ideas. I encouraged him to go with his first thoughts and to speak from his heart, following the principles we try to encourage in students: "write what you know and tell the truth."

Darryl:
I worry about conferencing, about taking over a student's paper. With Ruby this is not a problem....Even so, I had to keep reminding myself to allow her to draw her own conclusions about her paper, with helpful hints but no overt alterations. And again I get to learn something—this time, I learn to keep my hands off another writer's work."

Ruby, a client:
He encouraged and supported me through my writing...I learned how to organize my paper in such a way *that would please not just my professors but myself.* (italics mine)

Darryl again:
The assertive ratio between the assistant and the client may vary during a single conference. A client who was uncertain about the direction of his work at the beginning of a session might, after gaining some confidence..., become more assertive. The assistant must then adjust his interaction to allow the client the freedom he has discovered he needs.

I like the way Sam Keen describes this process of coming to freedom in *To a Dancing God*: "I become gracefully free when I become convinced that I have the power to do a new thing" (30).

8) Assertive collaboration promotes community.

In fact, assertive collaboration creates the best sort of community, one in which the shared goal, whether spoken or unspoken, is

growth of persons. When assertive collaboration is the norm or the protocol for interaction, community breaks out all over the place. Chad describes the community:

> What [we] have...in the Writing Center is a complete learning circle, not only...for those students who use it, but for those who work as assistants in it. The students learn from the assistants, the assistants from the students, the assistants from the assistants, and both the assistants and the students from you.

I would add that in our Writing Center we're increasingly seeing student clients learning from other student clients. And I have certainly been privileged to learn from both staff members and clients, especially to learn what assertive collaboration can effect.

Community is a phenomenon that interests me very much—particularly the synergy or the "magic" that can result from it to promote growth. Cheryl talks about the "magic" of community:

> I was puzzled and intrigued by the flow of positive energy....And the effect this energy held over writers.... I wanted to find out how this magical power evolved....I realized the magical power was willingness to listen, encourage, and, in some instances, acknowledge students' fears of writing. The conferences ...provided a comfortable environment to openly talk about obstacles....

Our campus is a fairly large, urban, commuter campus and opportunities for students to feel *a part of* rather than *apart from* are rare, it seems. Briget writes of the Writing Center:

> At last I have found a place at UALR where I feel at home! I have never had the feeling of "belonging" at UALR before...there is a sense of wanting to belong to a place where you spend so much time.

And Ferrol continues on this theme:

> In addition to being a "home," the Writing Center is like a little community or family. This spirit of community

is...lacking at UALR...I wish that every student could have the opportunity to rotate through the Writing Center at least one semester, if nothing more than to acquire this sense of belonging.

A number of philosophers of our time emphasize the power of community to promote growth, among them Scott Peck and Gerald May. May comes about as close as may be possible to the why of community; he writes, "Grace is always a present possibility for individuals, but its flow comes to fullness through community" (52).

I want to close on the note of community—by adding my voice in bearing witness to its "magic" in promoting growth—and by saying that I am grateful to have *experienced* the growth promoted by assertive collaboration and by this special kind of community.

Sally Crisp with Ruby Bayani, Earnest Cox, Donna Crossland, Chad Fitz, Darryl Haley, Paige James, Briget Laskowski, Ferrol Lattin, Kerri Lowry, Leroy Mayfield, Lisa Mongnobove, Cheryl Patterson, and Charlesena Walker

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